

# **Disturbing The Peace**



**Emmanuel Achu**

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**Emmanuel Achu**



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## Content

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| 1. <i>The Bias</i>              | 1   |
| 2. <i>Grandma`s Plea</i>        | 7   |
| 3. <i>Club Life</i>             | 18  |
| 4. <i>Anniversary Gift</i>      | 32  |
| 5. <i>Poisoned Gift</i>         | 40  |
| 6. <i>Passing the Buck</i>      | 60  |
| 7. <i>Bliss But Just a Bit</i>  | 68  |
| 8. <i>The Crucial Journey</i>   | 75  |
| 9. <i>Back to Sender</i>        | 82  |
| 10. <i>An Unwanted Friend</i>   | 93  |
| 11. <i>The Deaconess</i>        | 102 |
| 12. <i>Raising the Stakes</i>   | 114 |
| 13. <i>Duty and Sacrifice</i>   | 121 |
| 14. <i>Family in Crisis</i>     | 129 |
| 15. <i>Reckless Daughter</i>    | 136 |
| 16. <i>Tightening the Noose</i> | 143 |
| 17. <i>The Real Patriot</i>     | 154 |
| 18. <i>The Wrong Child</i>      | 159 |
| 19. <i>Facing the Enemy</i>     | 169 |



**I**t was the start of another new year. Minna left the school premises immediately she finished her last lesson for the day. She had planned to stay on until 3:30 pm, the normal closing time and mark a pile of test papers. But, she would have to do that some other time for Tetang had called pleading with her to prepare lunch for some special guests. She would have looked for some very convincing excuse to stay on had Tetang not revealed that the guests were some rich people he was trying to pamper into giving him a contract. Any extra franc into the family purse was always welcome.

They were civil servants but everybody knew civil servant salaries were nothing more than slave wages and to make ends meet, people just had to moonlight. Besides his normal duties as an architect at the Public Works Department, Tetang had private deals to draw plans and manage building projects, which contributed quite significantly to the family income.

On her part, Minna gave part-time lectures in some community schools, especially during holidays. This often aided in covering some unplanned family forays into leisure and luxury as well as some basic needs. They needed money to take care of four children, build and maintain their own home, run an averagely nice car and live a modest lifestyle. Nothing very fanciful but enough to make even Minna's own mother believe they could be more generous in helping other members of the family.

'Selfish people!' that was what Minna's mother called them the last time she visited. That was some four years ago and it still felt as if it was just the previous day. And Ma had not stopped issuing the same condemnation through letters which were coming this time with bewildering frequency.

'Selfish? No!' said Minna unconsciously in the taxi that was taking her home. The other passengers jerked their faces in her direction. She grinned and turned her face in shame. She was not mad. No chance there. She was just worked up with her mother's unfair judgement.

Minna could not understand why her mother kept saying they were selfish. She and her husband gave more to the family than any other family member. Her mother and father were on a regular allowance paid exclusively from Minna's salary. She had paid fees for cousins, half-sisters and half-brothers and always sent presents to her uncles and aunties. Why could Ma never acknowledge that she and her husband were more of assets than liabilities to the family?

'Madam you never reach?' shouted the taxi driver, jamming his brakes with some anger. He had stopped midway between the Hospital Roundabout and Azire Presbyterian Church Junction as Minna had requested. That was just opposite the incomplete storey block of a Pentecostal church.

'Sorry,' said Minna with embarrassment. She had been so hooked up with her thoughts that she had forgotten she was not in their car but in public transport. And that was not all of the exhibition she was making of herself. When she got out of the taxi, she slammed the door with some force and immediately started rushing across the road. She did not even hear the driver shouting after her. It was when she heard tyres screech on the tarmac just close to her feet that she realised her attention was urgently needed. She actually had to jump across the gutter to the Presbyterian Church side of the road.

'Tief woman,' screamed the driver. 'Give ma money.'

Minna felt her head grow triple fold. 'Na forget,' said she in embarrassment while scrambling in frenzy with her handbag. It was an old enormous piece of leather with as many compartments as there were people on the face of the earth. She loved this bag which had an independent space for every aspect of her life as teacher, mother, wife, and fashion connoisseur of sorts. It had compartments for groceries, money, handkerchiefs, extra scarves, her cell phone, greasy snacks and miscellany.

Tetang hated the bag and had once attempted to chuck it away but Minna had clutched onto it as if her life depended on it. Here she was wishing Tetang had succeeded for she was finding it difficult to get to the money compartment. When she at last got there, it was empty. That had never happened before and all of a sudden she thought one of the passengers had thrust a hand in her bag. She should check carefully first before throwing any accusations. The passengers were already eyeing her with frosty looks and she just knew the slightest false move on her part would lead to another world war.

She had always made it a point of holding the coins in her hand before stepping into the taxi. Such an error had never happened before. She had always been a disciplined person. It was Ma that had caused her to forget the routine. She made a quiet curse as she kept groping for the money.

Minna could feel her watch ticking away right in the centre of brains, sending waves of panic through her. The other passengers and the driver watched on with mounting impatience as she battled feverishly for the taxi fare. Just a hundred francs! How was she behaving like one who was entering a taxi for the first time? It was not like her to keep probably busy people waiting in a taxi. If only she knew, she would have asked her husband to come and pick her up. Such a disgrace!

The driver started hooting the horn in anger. That caused curious passers-by to stop and watch. Even some primary school pupils who were playing on the green field below the church, also stopped to watch. This sparked further chaos on Minna's nerves. She tore the lining from one compartment to the other until her hand went right down to the rough leather bottom of the bag. She touched something round and metallic. Her heart kicked with excitement. She snatched it and pulled it out with great hope. Great was her disappointment when it turned out to be the lid of a bottle of lotion that formed part of her cosmetic artillery. Some four men who had gathered around burst out laughing.

'Be patient driver,' begged Minna, her whole body shaking. 'I am truly sorry. The money is somewhere in here.'

'Thief thing,' roared the driver. 'Big woman like you playing games like a common rascal.'

'Believe me, it's here. Somewhere.'

'Stop pretending, dis woman,' one of the passengers, a big woman in a flashy boubou said in contempt. 'Call yourself a teacher and you cannot pay a simple taxi fare. Teacher my foot. The people in whom we entrust the future of our children.' She spat out of the window and it landed by Minna's feet.

How did the woman know she was a teacher? Minna wanted to protest and curse at the same time but the breath was cut out of her by the next action of the woman. The woman waved a five hundred francs note and handed it to the driver. 'That's for your fare and our time that you have wasted. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

Minna thought it was all a joke. She a charity case? Did she look like a poor, miserable woman? She kept fumbling for her own money. Minna's hand finally surfaced with money only when the driver had ignited his car. It was a thousand francs note. 'No need for that,' she said to the woman and tried to grab at the frame of the driver's door. But the car was too fast for her and she made some stumbling steps after the car before regaining her balance. She held the note in front of her, feeling guilt, anger and embarrassment all at once. They had misjudged her just as her Ma had always misjudged her.

As she was about to put the money back into her treacherous bag, it was snatched out of her hand with such suddenness that she almost did not feel it. 'Thief,' she shouted almost as an afterthought and would have run after him across the road had there not suddenly appeared a long line of vehicles. Even her voice was lost in the cacophony of traffic. No law-abiding man could hear and go after the thief for her sake. She stood and watched helplessly as the thief vanished behind the houses across the road. When she turned around, the men who had gathered to witness the show exploded in laughter. Accomplices, Minna concluded but did not know what to do.



‘At least you’ve paid your debt to society,’ one of them said and the laughter rose by decibels. Even the children on the field also started laughing.

How very true, thought Minna as she rushed away from the men, wishing she could cork herself in a bottle or just vanish completely from the face of the earth. One thousand francs was nothing compared to people’s time she had wasted. But it should have gone to the people and not to the thief. That would have been fair. She just sighed, crossed the road and doubled her strides in the direction of the one place where she could find peace and the support to gather back some sanity.

She bowed her head rigidly, not prepared to face another person who had witnessed the sordid spectacle. Minna felt as if the whole world was watching her every step and she could hear the laughter of the men and children reverberating behind her.

All of this was because her own blood Ma kept saying or insinuating she was selfish. And this bias was based on the special regard Ma had for Minna’s reckless sister, Dorothy. Dorothy never did anything for Ma besides feeding Ma with lies and capturing the totality of Ma’s heart. Dorothy had the sugar-coated tongue that she used to great effect on Ma. But Minna who did the caring and paid the bills never had any good word from Ma. That was gross injustice.

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The road branching into Sister Samba’s bar was some fifty metres above the Pentecostal church. When Minna got to the branch, she literally ran into the bar. Thank goodness, there were only a handful of customers for it was not yet midday. Minna was panting in lethal pulses as she rushed towards the counter, dumping the hazardous bag on a dirty table.

‘Sister Samba,’ she cried, out of breath, throwing her weight against the rough counter that was covered by cheap, disintegrating plywood. She stretched out a hand but could not reach any of the bottles of drinks that stared at her in titillating display. She was not a beer drinker but any could have served her well for that moment. Unfortunately, she had short hands and she did not have the strength to jump over the counter.

‘Sister Samba! If you don’t come out here this moment you’ll have a corpse on your hands.’

A girl came rushing out. ‘Welcome madam. My madam is a bit occupied. She will be out in a minute. What can I offer you?’

Minna looked at the girl, offended that she could be asking a question that had an obvious answer. Then she realised the girl was new. ‘Anything as long as it’s cold and doesn’t require any formality to drink.’

The girl looked at her in incomprehension. Minna could tell the girl was confused. ‘Give me cold, sweet mimbo.’ She pointed at a brand of soft drinks with special emphasis that it must be from the fridge. She had decided against her better judgment to avoid beer. Only beer would have lulled the waves that were swashing and lashing up and down her body. But she remembered she had an even more delicate assignment to do at home and alcohol was never a good friend in such situations. Hence, soft drink it had to be.

The girl wanted to offer it with all the occasion worthy of a good waitress. Placing beer and glass in a tray and coming out of the counter to deliver the goods. But Minna did not have the time for all that. She ordered the girl to place the bottle on the counter. She practically snatched the bottle from the girl and yanked the cover open herself.

Minna sucked from the mouth of the bottle like a baby that had not had the mother’s milk for ages while the girl looked on in shock. The coldness of the liquid was close to freezing but Minna had fire in her intestines. She did not stop for a single breath until the bottle was three-quarters empty. She would not even have stopped had her friend’s sonorous voice not slashed into her brain.

‘Na die you be dey die?’ Sister Samba came round to meet her friend.

'Sister Samba,' cried Minna, choking in the process. She had to slap her chest several times before regaining some capacity to talk. 'Eh remain small like na coffin we dey talk ma sister.'

'Take it easy oh, sister. Those four children need you solid and whole for many more years. You go, that's all about them. Another woman would be there before you are even buried. And her own children would have pride of place.'

Minna just sighed and collapsed on a chair by the counter. The bar proprietor sat on the chair opposite. Both women used to be colleagues in the Technical High School before Sister Samba, actually Mrs Anna Samba, lost her husband. With the bit of fortune her husband left, Mrs Samba decided she could cope better with her children by resigning from the teaching job and running a small business.

After a string of ventures, Mrs Samba ended with the snack-bar, which really did prove the most lucrative. From the bar, she could afford boarding school education for most of her children and still live comfortably. Sister Samba was the name of the bar. It eventually became the popular name by which Mrs Samba was called.

Minna liked Sister Samba for her easy and accommodating manners and often relied on her sisterly advice, which often stretched to good recipes. Sister Samba used to be an effective Home Economics teacher.

'Sister Samba, I made a fool of myself today in public,' Minna began and presented all the grimy details.

'I told you about that bag that you want to carry the whole world inside,' said Sister Samba laughing and folding over. 'How do you find a pin in a haystack?' The laughter doubled over and Minna could not help but join in.

'That you paid your debt to society? Ha ha ha...' Sister Samba lost control and both women began hitting the table with their hands, tears springing out of their eyes. 'The men were the jury and the thief the firing squad.'

Minna could not take it anymore and she desperately fell against the back of the chair, which sent her flying to the ground. She did not even attempt at picking herself up for all her body was pulsating in uncontrollable hilarity. Sister Samba threw her own quaking body on the table. This rattled the wooden members until the joints began to give way.

'Stop all this,' pleaded Sister Samba. 'If you came here to kill me with laughter, just go back to your school. Hee hee hee,' she plunged in impotently again, every corner of her lungs vibrating.

Minna tried to pick herself up but remained overwhelmed by the maddening tide of mirth. This was one of the main reasons why she liked to stop over at Sister Samba's place. To laugh away the strains and stresses of the day. Get little bits and tips on tackling sometimes very personal worries.

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A deafening scream from Sister Samba ended the laughter. Minna actually jumped up from the floor in fear while the girl ran out of the counter. 'Under the table,' Sister Samba roared and scrambled away from the table over which they had been sitting.

'Snake?' Minna yelled and began to run towards the main door. Sister Samba followed. Though she had a limp in one leg, she would not have had anything to envy from the world record holder in the hundred-metre sprint. Both women stopped at the door and watched as the girl, young enough to be their daughter, walked to the table, grabbed a free chair and casually lifted the bright, opaque, plastic cover with one leg of the chair and folded the edge of the cover over the table. Then she burst out in her own brand of laughter, holding her chest.

'What is it Berri?' Sister Samba shouted from the door.

'It's a goat,' the girl shouted back, shooing the animal away.

'A goat nibbling on my toes?' laughed Sister Samba still not believing.

‘Eh? Even goats know you don’t have somebody to nibble on your toes?’ That was Minna and the women started another round of bellyaching laughter.

‘And it’s a he-goat,’ both women shouted as the black and white herbivore came running towards them.

‘The goat really means business,’ said Sister Samba, running as far away from the door as she could. ‘Drive am quick, Berri,’ she said to the girl who was already in the process of chasing the goat away.

Minna just shifted to one side for the goat to pass. ‘This one is on one-hundred degree heat. You wouldn’t have had any chance if you didn’t run away when you did.’

‘I say my sister. And in nine months, I would be in a labour room pushing out twins. One goat, one human.’ The women collapsed against the wall, roaring in fits.

Minna ended the madness when she looked at her watch. ‘Stop this nonsense Sister Samba. I came for business that is more important. I need a recipe for something quick but seductive. I am on a charm offensive.’

‘Don’t tell me you are getting tired of that tall, muscular dude called Tetang. Could I have him please?’

‘Shut up, I beg. No chance. You have your goat.’

There began another bout of laughter.

‘Seriously, Sister Samba, Tetang just called that he is bringing over some guests from whom he wants to snatch a contract. I need to charm them. I need your help. I don’t have the time to think of what to cook.’ Minna pulled out some tissue from her large bag and mopped away tears from her face.

‘Do you have money?’

‘How much are we talking about?’

‘Sit down Minna and write out a blank cheque. I’ll be back in a jiffy.’ Sister Samba walked away like a model. She was still a smart, trim, tall woman though her face gave the impression she was older than her forty-five years. The toil of being a widow with a crowd of children was really telling on her.

‘Jiffy? Hola star!’ Minna mocked and settled down on a comfortable chair by the door. She looked again at her watch and was scared she would fail her man. She had never failed him and she did not intend to fail him now. She loved her Tetang for always. Since they met seventeen years ago, it had been a blissful matrimony. She knew she was a lucky woman to have married a man who met her needs right in the middle. She would never think of leaving him. God forbid that she could even think of such a thing.

Sister Samba reappeared with a large straw basket in her hand. She had carefully covered the basket with an embroidered cloth. She placed everything in front of Minna.

‘I asked for a recipe, not a basket,’ said Minna, eyeing her friend with suspicion and lifting the cloth. ‘Fresh bush meat,’ she shouted in joyful surprise. ‘What kind of animal is this?’ With an excited frown, Minna pulled out an animal the size of a mature rabbit. It had been disembowelled and the legs stretched out on sturdy sticks. It was hot and brown, just out of a smoking fire, and the skin brightly scraped.

‘Keep your voice down,’ cautioned Sister Samba. ‘If those forest guards hear, we are in trouble. A new law forbids the eating of bush meat. Please, just keep your excitement to yourself.’

‘Aha Sister Samba! Meat from our bush and we cannot eat?’

‘Well, that’s another debate. This my dear is what you are going to prepare. Porcupine Jolly.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Minna confused.

‘Porcupine stew my dear. If you look further, you will see some plantains and the spices that go with the porcupine. I was about to prepare these for my customers. But I see you need it now more than me. You are going to pay me what I would have been expecting from my customers and it’s a fortune.

‘I know you, money eye.’

'One more vulgar word and I'll kick you out of here empty-handed.'

'Sorry madam,' said Minna in a parody of seriousness.

'You are lucky I woke up on the good side of the bed this morning. This is what you are going to do. Put just a little bit of water when you are boiling the meat. Add those spices when it is about done. Then you separately make some tomato stew and pour it in the meat. Keep heating until the stew has soaked into the meat. Walla! You would have found the way into any man's heart.'

'I don't know what I'll do without you,' said Minna, greatly serious this time.

'Can't do a fraction of what Tetang does, can I.'

'Shut up Sister Samba and talk sense for once. I am not into laughter anymore. How much for all this trouble?'

'I talked of a blank cheque, didn't I? Can you put a value on what you have there? Go and feed your guests then you come back and tell me. Then we'll make a price.'

'Weh, Sister Samba. You were supposed to be the pope but alas, you don't wear trousers.'

'Says who? Because I am wearing all these wrappas? Get out of here before some man I know gets to meet an empty table and sends you packing. Go and charm them my dear. And one last advice my younger sister. Don't take your Ma too seriously. She is just being a sentimental mother like all of us. And she's old for goodness sake. You have more sense than she does. As far as Dorothy is concerned, let her be. You have tried your best. Time you concentrated on you and your children. You cannot force Dorothy to be what she doesn't want to be. Allow her to fly. She will land one day. They always do.'

'I wish it were that easy. I had long washed my hands off Dorothy but Ma would not let me. She behaves as if I am the one who gave birth to Dorothy.'

'That is mothers for you Min. Every child is as precious as the next no matter the kind of character. All you have to do is be tolerant of her and just pretend to fall in her line.'

Minna wanted to say more. She felt Sister Samba had not understood the situation well. But she did not have the time and she realised the matter was too complicated to explain to somebody who was not part of the family however good intentioned that somebody was. She knew the capacity of her mother and sister better than Sister Samba but was grateful someone had at least listened to her agony with sympathy. 'Thanks sis,' said Minna as she wound her way up to the main road.

Though not all her problems had been resolved, Minna went with some new spirit. Her immediate trouble had anyway been solved by the basket that she held delicately as she marched up the road. She could celebrate that and smile away over the tragedy on the public highway where she had been the unique star. As for her trouble with Ma and Dorothy, she could afford to encase that in a remote part of her mind for the time. She would deal with that later. Porcupine Jolly! She smiled and strode off.

There were still some three hours to go and Minna decided to walk home which was not very far. It was an opportunity to savour the sights and sounds. She had walked these parts for close to a decade but the old, enduring scenes still filled her with delight. Well, the spirit she had left with from her friend's place did much to spur this enthusiasm.

Straight in front of her rose the almost vertical slope of the plateau that bore Bamenda Station. Though quite a distance away, Minna felt if she flung a piece of stone it would hit one of the exposed rock surfaces. This geological relic was exceptionally prominent this morning. The grass on the slope was furry green and gold while lines of new eucalyptus shimmered in the hazy Harmattan atmosphere.

On top of the plateau jutted the cosy lodgings of the ruling classes for Station was the administrative core of the town. Its position was a clear reminder of the colonial culture of raising the rulers above the ruled though time had done little to change the mentality of the modern aboriginal rulers.

Minna's eyes lingered for a while at the giant though humble architecture of black and white stones that made the Presbyterian Church stand out over the surrounding houses. She could see the struggle between the old and the new on the roof tops that showed disarrayed patterns of old rusty sheets that had been there for ages, and more modern, though less heralding aluminium sheets. Minna felt a certain spiritual upliftment as the bells of this church where she worshipped struck 11:30.

She walked on the crumbling edge of the surfaced road as cars trundled by while bars and eating-houses gradually built up crowds of tired and hungry workers. There seemed to be some excitement by an open shed where sawn timber from mostly eucalyptus was sold.

She could not resist the urge to stop and watch as people gathered around two bare-chested boys who were struggling to exchange blows. They were probably fighting over girlfriends or money, Minna thought and smiled as she remembered the spectacle she had given to another crowd just a short while before.

The sun was inching towards the centre of the sky though a scudding sheet of cloud made the heat bearable. Traffic flowed freely as taxi men who commanded the majority of traffic in town had parked down for sumptuous lunch breaks. Minna could move her forty-year-old, plump frame without the fear of being knocked down. There were no proper pedestrian kerbs and during peak hours, people just had to scramble with vehicles to move through. There was however, no traffic worry for Minna now.

Her regret only came when she had to branch off at the junction to take the dusty road that led to their humble quarter, Atuakom. Here, there was no tar on the road and she was wearing open, low-heeled sandals. January was the middle of the dry season and she was sure to have a coat of dust all over her feet by the time she got home. She frowned briefly, dreading the prospects of having to dip her feet in cold water later in the house to wash off the dust. She had no choice but to accept the situation as she had been doing for close to a decade.

The dust, the changing seasons and walking home was her life for now and the foreseeable future. It was in this area that she and her husband had decided to build their own house. And they had just one car that was permanently with Tetang. She had never bothered to learn how to drive.

As she approached her home, her neighbours greeted her noisily and wondered just why she should be closing this early. 'Government doesn't pay me enough. I have to work according to my wages,' she joked back in return and inquired after their health. She bought some pepper and fresh green spices from a girl who carried the items in a tray on her head. These she needed for the special lunch she was going to prepare. After stopping by the

clinic to see a neighbour's mother who had been admitted some two days earlier, she headed straight home.

Home was some hundred metres from the public tap at the Atukom Junction. Minna felt sorry for the long queue of men, women and children who had probably been waiting for hours to fetch just a bucket of water. She quietly thanked God that her house had pipe-borne water otherwise, she would not have even thought about any special lunch.

The Fru's home was slightly detached from the rest and marked out by an all-round stone and concrete fence topped with iron spikes. Every family that had a bit of money did invest in a fence of some kind for security. Most of the neighbouring houses were also fenced.

Minna unlocked the metal gate and grunted in relief as she slipped in. In spite of the fact that they had lived here for so many years, she still felt ripples of excitement every time she entered the yard. And this was not just because she felt safe and had the satisfaction of being a homeowner. The place had this eternal elegance for her husband who was an architect had used his best professional brains to lay it out.

This bright, late morning, everything did seem to glow especially because two weeks earlier, the whole place had been renovated. The smell of paint still filled the air. A cladding of red bricks had been added to the façade, which before was dominated by plain, plastered walls. Also new was a tiled veranda, edged all round by deftly sculpted balusters and inclined pillars that held a brown-tiled roof over the veranda.

To one side of the house was a bougainvillea hedge that Tetang was obsessed in keeping neat and trimmed. A huge plum tree ruled the other side and it was in a full blossom of flowers. The family was in for a bumper harvest come the third quarter of the year. Manicured lawns, partitioned by blossoming flowerbeds covered the front yard. Minna felt she was in the home of some rich dignitary as she strode down a paved track to the veranda and then to the main door. She keyed it open. The house was quiet but smelled clean and fresh. Her duty conscious children always made sure the house was in a good shape before going to school. She was proud of them.

She had paid off the last house-help. That decision had been forced on her by her own children who had proved to her to be very responsible. They were big enough to perform the necessary chores. They could clean, mop the floor, chop grass, weed the gardens, do the laundry and cook. A house-help would only be draining rare cash from the family. And the children had never failed her. They were not always perfect but the essentials were always right.

She looked at her dirty feet and locked the door. How could she place such feet on her precious floor? After removing her shoes, she walked barefooted to the backyard. She flung the shoes by the back door and moved across to the tap after slipping on a pair of slippers that she always kept in reserve. The tap was hooked on the wall of the firewood kitchen that was detached from the main house. She winced and fisted her hands before plunging her feet under the cold jet of water from the tap. Immediately after, she watered two ridges of waterleaf and tomatoes that she had planted by the fence before keying her way into the house through the back door.

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Minna did not have time to change and decided to cook in the very clothes she had worn to school. It consisted of a moderately officious purple suit with her hair in refined rasta locks. She however did remove the jacket and covered the rest with wrappa that went to her armpit. Her hair was under a cheap head tie and she walked about barefooted. She liked the smooth feel of the glazed ceramic tiles under her feet. This was a testament of her children's efficient hands in cleaning the floor.

It was time for some serious work. First, she peeled the plantains and set them on a sawdust stove in the firewood kitchen. The more delicate dish of Porcupine Jolly was going to be prepared in the gas kitchen that formed part of the main house. After she had

chopped the meat and placed it in a pot over the gas fire, the gate bell rang. Not her husband and friends she prayed. The bells at the church chimed twelve and she concluded it could not be any of the children. Who could have known somebody was in the house at this hour?

The bell went again and she left in anger to attend to whoever was there. As she descended from the veranda to the yard, she stumbled and almost went on the ground. This was a bad sign. She just held herself up and the cost was her left slippers that snapped into two, and her sustaining some twisting of her ankle tendons. She sat on the edge of the veranda to massage the ankle, emitting grunts in the process. It did not feel too bad for after just a couple of massages, she got up and the pain was gone. After removing the slippers, she now continued with more care to the gate.

'Who is it?' she called for she could not see through the tall gate that had solid metal panels. There was no response. She called out again. Silence still greeted her. After debating quietly in her mind, she decided to open. Maybe it was some desperate person who needed help. She opened and peeked out but saw no one.

Minna went fully out of the gate but again saw nobody of any significance. The dusty road that passed in front of the gate was bare but for a couple of stray pigs and two infants chasing a ball at the far end. That the children could have played with the bell? She shouted at them, but they did not bother about her. They concentrated on their ball.

It was as she made to lock back the gate that she saw the half of a dirty envelop poking through a slit at the hinged edge of the gate. After moments of hesitating, she snatched it out. Who could have dropped a letter and run away so fast? And it was addressed to her? Had the letter been there when she first arrived and she had not taken notice? No, she shook her head. The very person who rang the bell and vamoosed must have left it there. But why run away?

Minna studied the inscription on the envelope. The writing was strange and rough but readable. She held it against her chest before tearing it open.

*My dear daughter,*

*Why can't you have pity on me and look after your sister as I have been begging you. Not all the fingers of the hand are the same. Cut out one and the whole hand won't work well. If you can't pity your sister, pity me an old woman who carried you for nine months and gave you the best of her. Forgive her as the bible says. Don't forget that I too have forgiven you of many bad things you did. I had to do it for you are my child. My blood.*

*You people have to bond together and fight this war that your father and his new wife have unleashed on us. If you people keep joking, you will lose your own share of the heritage and my mate and her children will get everything. Me, I am getting weaker and weaker to fight them. I need you and your sister's support.*

*I know your brother is a lost sheep that shall never be found. And what is it they say? Divided we fall. You girls have to pull together to be strong. Your sister may be reckless but she is sometimes fearless and has a mouth that even causes your father to freeze. You can use that as a weapon to fight back.*

*Please Minna, go and get her or send her some money to come up. If she won't come go and get the child. She will follow after. The maternal instinct would send her running. She is prepared to send the child to me but I am not strong enough and the atmosphere here is not good to bring up a child.*

*Your mother*

The cheek of it! Minna flung the letter to the ground before picking it up again and tearing it into pieces. 'Nonsense! A finger with incurable whitlow should be cut off,' she said with a sneer and tears began to well out of her eyes. She gathered all the pieces of paper with her bare feet, opened the gate and swept everything still with her feet to the road. That was what she thought of the letter and its sender.



After locking the gate, she sat on a boulder by the gate, holding her head in cupped hands. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. After the immediate stormy reaction, it was time for more sober reflections. The headaches she had had from her sister, were more than all the other headaches she had had since she was born. And that was why her immediate emotions had been a desire to wring her sister's neck.

If there was a woman who had the perfect life and marriage in the world, then it was Minna. She could not remember a time she had had any agonising exchange with her man as she had seen amongst other couples. Her children were just angels. They had never given her any cause to have sleepless nights or recurring thoughts. She was a happy woman but alas, like every good thing, there was always a spoiler. Minna's own spoiler was Dorothy and adding to this of late was her Ma.

If ever Minna had had sleepless nights, then Dorothy was the cause. It was not like that in the beginning. Minna leaned her back against the gate and closed her eyes. She felt warm blood begin to flow into her veins as her mind travelled back in time to the good old days. The days when she and her sister used to be like one in spite of the gap of eight years between them.

Dorothy used to be an intelligent girl. She was always amongst the top in class and completed primary school with credits. She was also very responsible and loving. As early as ten years, she could do major domestic tasks. She used to wash her sister's clothes and do the cooking whenever Minna or Ma was tired.

When it was time for Minna to go back to college, Dorothy would do the ironing and pack her sister's box. She would then prepare chin-chin and chips all by herself for her sister to take to college. These she did without even asking Minna. Dorothy was the one who used to cover for Minna when Tetang appeared on the scene. And Dorothy kept all the secrets, and even gave Minna some tips on how to handle a man.

It used to amaze Minna how her younger sister got all her wild but effective ideas. She used to attribute it to the girl's natural brain capacity. Minna however discovered only much later, that her sister was not all the innocence she had assumed. But before the discovery, Dorothy was top of Minna's life agenda.

In the beginning, life indeed was very tight. Minna and her husband subsisted in a two room apartment, living a hand-to-mouth existence. Government made drastic cuts on civil servants' wages after Tetang had taken a loan to build a house for his father in the village. The bank refused to lower the instalments Tetang had agreed to pay. As a result, more than half of his salary had to go for debt payment.

Minna who knew she was going to be absorbed by the education ministry after training found herself on the streets. The government no longer had the money to recruit new teachers. Minna had to shuttle from one private school to the other where selfish managers took advantage of high unemployment rates to offer just enough pocket money as salaries. Minna often had to leave her two children in the care of a kind neighbour while she was teaching.

Minna would have liked her sister to live with them in the very beginning to help her with the children as their father had suggested. It was a brilliant idea but Minna was not sure she and her husband could bear the cost of keeping Dorothy and besides, Minna had a bigger vision for her sister. Her very intelligent sister had to get a good education.

Minna knew the girl had a head that could offer more to the world than babysitting. Moreover, she knew that sooner or later, family members would curse her for daring to limit her own sister's career to domestic chores. If the means had been there, Dorothy would have been living with her the very first day she entered her husband's home.

Minna was still not prepared to take in her sister until some four years later when she went to visit the family in the village. She had been reading the letters of the strife between her parents that arose as a consequence of her father's new wife and had not bothered to visit. She was at that time still in a financial mess. But the last letter her mother sent was



extremely worrying. So worrying that Minna had to plead with Tetang to borrow money for her to travel to Widikum.

Ma had developed hypertension but what frightened Minna even more when she got to the village was the fact that her brilliant sister had stayed in the house for over three years since completing primary school. Their just retired father claimed there was no money for Dorothy to go to secondary school. Minna did shed tears when she saw for herself that her intelligent sister was almost going wild. The situation was so hopeless that the only way out of it, Minna decided, was taking Dorothy out of the village. That was how Minna got her younger sister to live with them in spite of the unyielding hardship.

For a year, Dorothy stayed at home taking care of the house and the children while Minna worked to save for school fees. Dorothy turned out to be not really a burden as Minna had feared but a true blessing in the house. Before, Minna and her husband used to return very late and slept with hunger or ate cold left-overs. But with Dorothy around, they were sure to meet a warm meal, the house in perfect order as well as clean and healthy children. Dorothy even went the extra mile of preparing and packaging snacks which she sold to school children. All the money, she gave to Minna who saved it in the school fees account.

Minna's last child came with good fortune for the family. Government salaries were increased and Minna was finally recruited by the ministry. There was no longer any obstacle for Dorothy not to go to school. Minna enrolled her sister in a reputable private school and was proud of the results that her sister came back with in the beginning. Like in primary school, Dorothy was a top-rated student and had good remarks from her teachers about her conduct and performance.

While making top grades, Dorothy still actively performed the role of a babysitter for her nieces and nephew. All the children were very much attached to her for she alone knew how to play with them and let them eat biscuits that their mother never wanted them to eat. When a child was sick, Minna could depend on her sister to take the child to the hospital and pamper the child back to good health. Dorothy would carry a sick child on her back the whole day and would never complain. All she would do was sing songs to make the child sleep.

*Swing lo, sweet chariots ...*

Minna remembered the song that Dorothy always sang and started humming it. The song was so alluring that Minna resorted to intoning the words. She remembered how Dorothy used to bring the child over to her bedroom when Tetang had travelled out. Together they would sing the song and other songs until the child would be snoozing away in peace and they would all sleep on the same bed until morning.

'Why did you have to change?' cried Minna, throwing despairing hands in the air.

There was a sudden thud on the gate from behind. Minna got up with a start and was about to run away when she heard a chorus of piglet snorts. She sighed and dusted the back of her wrappa. She had better things to do than ruminating over irretrievable history.

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When she stepped into the parlour, her whole body was caught in a spasm. She stepped back on the veranda, crouching and holding her belly in the process. She coughed and coughed until tears ran down her face. If it was this bad in the parlour, then the kitchen was probably in ashes. She held her breath and dived in the kitchen. Thank God, there was no fire. Only smoke. But smoke with such an intensity that she could see her fingers only after squinting hard. And the smoke stung her eyes.

Minna closed her eyes and groped for the knob on the gas cooker. She knew the position of everything in the kitchen by instinct and succeeded in turning off the fire. Unable to hold her breath any further, she gasped desperately for air only to find herself

stuffing her lungs with stinging fumes. That however succeeded in pushing her outside. Between the two kitchens, the smoke was still as intense as it was in the gas kitchen.

Minna ran away towards the fence where the air was more bearable. She bent over to clear her lungs while struggling to plan her next course of action. It was then that she realised the real source of the smoke. The firewood kitchen. Through the window, she could see flames burning and thick, black fumes gushing out of the door.

She shouted before realising no one could hear. She plucked up some courage, filled the bucket she had used in watering her plants with soil and poured the soil over the flames through the window. It was after two further rounds of soil that the fire was subdued to a manageable level. She could now carry water from the tap to completely extinguish the last flickers of flames.

After some five minutes when the fumes had cleared away, Minna entered the external kitchen to assess the damage and cause of the fire. She did not need any deep investigation. A log of wood on top of a pile of split wood had rolled down pushing over the sawdust stove. The log eventually caught fire, which then was transferred to the split wood.

Minna was thankful that the kitchen was built of blocks otherwise the whole place would have been reduced to ashes. Another minute and the rafters and door would have been engulfed. Minna poured more water on charred spots that were still emitting smoke. Breathing hard, she flung the bucket to one corner of the kitchen. She was tired but could not afford to take a rest. The fumes had added another layer of black soot on the walls though that did not make any significant change to what was there before.

The worst damage was on Minna's aluminium pot whose bottom had been melted and all its contents spilt out. Most of the plantains were charred remains but for a few that had rolled to the ground outside. The few were however coated with earth making them unfit for human consumption. What was she going to do for Tetang and his friends?

The meat! Minna remembered and jumped back into the gas kitchen. She yanked off the lid of the pot and was relieved to find everything in tact. She had almost forgotten that the fire had come but from the external kitchen. The meat however was actually not done. She lit back the fire under the pot.

As she stirred the meat thinking of what to replace the plantains with, she remembered the smoke had not been restricted just to the kitchens. She ran into the main house and threw open all doors and windows. Then she switched on the fan that hung from the ceiling of the parlour. It would be terrible to have guests coughing the moment they stepped into the house. She sprayed all the rooms with air freshener, emptying a completely new can.

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Minna was sweating profusely when she at last settled down to fix up the porcupine stew and think of an alternative to plantains. As she began frying the onions and tomatoes, there went the bell again. She almost missed a heartbeat. Time Tetang installed an automatic gate with remote control, she thought rather selfishly. For now, she had no choice but to attend to the gate herself.

Her heart pounded faster when she saw the time on the clock in the parlour. 'To two!' she screamed. Barely an hour to go and she was yet to decide on the accompaniment for the stew. Once she was outside, she realised she was barefooted and had to run back to the bedroom to get her husband's slippers.

Akwen her oldest daughter was at the gate. Thank God for small mercies. Minna needed the presence of another human being like never before. And just the right person she needed for that crucial moment. At seventeen, Akwen was already like a sister to her mother. Though taller and thinner, Akwen had all her mother's face and sense of duty. Her mother could rely on her to take care of the other children and keep order in the house. Though Akwen could sometimes be negligent, she was most of the time on the right side of her mother.

'Something's burning Mami,' said Akwen after locking the gate.

'Just get in there and change before it burns you. I am curious why you are this early but I am not going to put you in the dock now because you have urgent work to do for me. Schools don't close until three-thirty. Just go and change.'

'Yes Madam. I know I became your slave when I started growing up. Just you wait. I'm getting married very soon. And just to clear your doubts, we were out on an excursion, which finished early. You can check with your colleague, the discipline master whom you know is God's solution to juvenile delinquency.'

'Get in there before I put an ugly scar on that face that would chase away every man. Even an angel.' Minna put on a smile, even if a very strenuous one, still a smile. Her sweet daughter who was dancing her way into the house had appeared in good time. 'And when you come out of those ugly uniforms, be sure to have thought of a good accompaniment for Porcupine Jolly for me,' Minna shouted in real desperation. Her own brains had stopped functioning.

'Porcu what?' shouted Akwen in reply and turning around with squinted eyes at her mother.

'Porcupine Jolly.'

'Never heard of it. Is it a kind of snake?'

Minna laughed. 'Get in there and just think.'

'Irish potatoes.' Minna heard her daughter say from the parlour as she gathered the door curtains to one side to let in more fresh air. She turned in the direction of the kitchen as Akwen ran to her room.

'Irish potatoes?' said Minna as an afterthought. She stopped by the door and smiled. 'Brilliant girl! Just perfect. Why couldn't I think of that and I have a whole shop of them. Thank you up there.' Minna raised her eyes towards the ceiling.

'What's the occasion?' asked Akwen breezing into the gas kitchen already in house outfits.

'Just go and peel half a pot of potatoes for me now and I'll answer your question later.'

'If you don't tell me now I'll tell Pa you nearly got the whole house burnt.'

Minna turned sharply in surprise. 'Does it still smell?'

'Like fire was burning in the parlour.'

'Shut up, mouthy girl. And this is your punishment for threatening your mother. After peeling the potatoes, spray the whole house again with some freshener. Clear?'

'Yes, unfair judge.'

There's some accra beans in the fridge. You can be eating them while peeling. That tells you I am a considerate judge. Be quick about it. Those potatoes should be done in thirty minutes.'

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In thirty minutes, the potatoes were boiling and this time over a gas fire. Minna judged that there was no time to pound more saw dust in the stove or lighting wood. Besides she would have ash all over her face and smell of smoke from the firewood kitchen and might have no time to freshen up to serve the guests.

At three, Tetang arrived with the rest of the children. Minna was disappointed thinking the guests had made other plans. After all the trouble? 'This is 3 p.m. as you said,' she said to Tetang frowning.

'No no no,' assured Tetang, as the children fled to their rooms. 'I left them somewhere drinking and thought I should come and check first before bringing them.'

'Check what?' said Minna throwing biting eyes at his tall muscular frame from toe to head. He was still a dude as Sister Samba had said though greying at the temples. 'You thought I was going to fail? Such confidence you have of me!'

'Come on Min. I was just nervous. I need the contract badly. I want them to see my home to know I am a serious person. See my charming wife and responsible children.' He

smiled a charming one rubbing Minna's taut face. He had come earlier with all sanity to make sure Minna was set. He was really bent on creating a good impression. 'As I had nothing to do I thought I could as well pick the children from school.'

'All is set,' said Minna in a softer tone as Tetang stepped into the parlour and inspected with his eyes. He made Minna anxious when he exhaled deeply and made no comment. Had he picked up the odour of smoke? But he didn't show any sign of having smelled something unusual. Instead, he made a brief smile and shrugged his shoulders. Was that a sign of satisfaction with the neatness of the house and his wife's prompt response to his plea or indication of an average pass? 'What is it?' Minna couldn't stand the tension.

'I talked about bringing ordinary human beings, not the head of state.'

Relief washed over Minna's body. 'What do you think I am?' said Minna with beefed-up confidence. She had every reason to be confident. Akwen had given her top marks about food and everybody knew Akwen had the most efficient taste buds in the whole universe.

Minna gave just a bit to Rogers and he wanted the whole pot. 'Get out of my kitchen you glutton.' She shoved him out of her kitchen, wincing as she watched him lick the oil that had run down his hand. She had also heard the rev of engines. 'Just go out before you drive my guests away with your table manners. And remember, you have to be on your best behaviour. No teasing of your sisters until the guests must have gone. Step one foot wrong and your father will murder you.'

'My ghost will come back and haunt him every night until he kicks the bucket,' said Rogers dodging away from a motherly slap. He was fifteen and preparing for his O levels. He was the truant and clown of the house and looked more like his mother than his father. He was already showing signs of his mother's plumpness but he would not cut down on his food despite his mother's constant pleas.

'Kicks the bucket? Seems you learned some language today,' said Minna in mockery. Her Rogers was very weak in English, unlike his sisters. 'Get out and let me attend to my guests.'

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When the men arrived, their attitude was so anticlimactic that Minna regretted having invested all the time and energy to prepare for their coming. The three men were in such hurry that they did not do any justice to the precious meal. One of them who appeared to be the leader did even suggest that they pass on the meal to attend to other engagements. Minna could have called him a rude name had the shortest of them not made some convoluted remark about the need for politeness.

They nibbled on bits of the porcupine and barely touched the potatoes. And Minna's excellent creation - a delicious cocktail of pineapples, beetroot, guava and lemon laced with milk and kept chilled inside a bowl of iced water was not given even a glance.

The men were profuse in giving her compliments but Minna saw through their hypocritical praises. Tall in volume but vacuous in sentiment. She was not flattered. She deliberately wore a woody smile as she received the superfluous words. If only they knew what she had gone through to prepare for their coming.

Good riddance, she said silently as the men drove away in their flashy cars. She wanted to feel sorry for her husband whose car was the only one among three not worth giving a second look. No, she shook her head. Serves him right for making her suffer for nothing.

She did recover a bit of her countenance only when her loving children fell on the table and guzzled every piece and drop with ravenous gusto. Good riddance to unfeeling men! The children did not need to say anything for her to know she had cooked a winner. Even the stains they left on her precious covers did not bother her one bit. She knew her expensive service had been well appreciated.

That was not to say the embers were not still burning in her belly. They were burning all right and she was going to vomit them out on the man who was responsible for her

anguish. He came back late when she was about to retire to bed. She had already taken her bath and slipped into a silky negligee when Tetang reappeared, stinking of beer.

‘Yes, get me to slave for you for nothing. Why did I have to go to all that expense and stress when all you were interested in was ridiculing me?’ She was sitting on her dressing table, and brushing her hair in front of the mirror. She had already undone the locks.

Tetang did not reply. In silence, he took the brush from her hand and began brushing her hair. She did not resist but instead looked on with surprise. This one came from where? Was he drunk? She could not understand. Must be some silly ploy to get her do something untoward. He kept brushing, not saying anything but instead began to hum a negro spiritual. Minna began to relax when she realised he was bent on brushing the hair.

*Swing lo, sweet chariots ...*

Dorothy’s famous song. Minna soon accompanied with the words as he kept humming along. He went from bass to tenor while she stayed with soprano. Her voice reeled out of her lungs with mounting passion, growing more and more melodious as her muscles and nerves kept unwinding.

Soon, Tetang flung away the brush and brought his fingers with deliberation to her temple. He dug and rubbed with such dexterity that Minna began to lose sense of reality. Her voice began to fade on its accord and her eyelids slipped over her eyeballs taking her into a sublime world where only sweetness and peace reigned.

Then she felt a warm, moist touch on her ear lobe and it glided down until it got to her lips. The magic of the human tongue. Her lips parted on their own and when she was expecting more, everything stopped. She came back to the real world, angrily. ‘What happened?’

‘Get dressed, we are going out,’ he said with a mischievous grin.

‘Now?’ said Minna with incredulity. ‘It’s past eight for goodness sake.’

‘So what?’ said Tetang and he was casual. ‘Is it not Friday?’

Minna didn’t know what to say. She was afraid of saying something that could come out stupid and meanwhile there were burning sensations rippling up and down her body. These needed even more urgent attention and Tetang was having other ridiculous ideas? Why could this man not read her mind?

She cried in silence, gritting her teeth as he mounted in their private toilet and shut the door. She had the urge to dive after him and grab him like a tiger. But hard, guttural sounds she heard coming from the toilet, that were followed by loud, thunderous farts made her body recoil in disgust.

She fell flat and cold on the bed, closing her eyes. All the sensations were gone and back came revulsion for the way the guests had treated her. The deeper cause of the revulsion however was the thought of Dorothy and Ma whose foibles forced their way into the fore of her mind.

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The first time Minna detected that Dorothy was changing was the remarkable drop in the girl’s class performance. Her results for promotion into form five was a disaster. She actually failed and was asked to repeat. Minna nearly collapsed in disbelief and had to go back to Dorothy’s school to check with the authorities. She still did not believe it when the class master presented the official mark sheets that confirmed the awful results.

As Minna walked away from the class master, she began talking to herself and even punched a fist in the air. She swore and cursed so loudly that some students gathered and started pointing at her. It was when she slipped on a banana peeling that she realised she was becoming a case for the mad hospital. She actually covered her face and fled out of the school gate when she saw the group of students laughing at her.

When Minna got home, she huffed and puffed at her junior sister until one would have thought Dorothy had killed somebody. Minna could not hold her shock and disappointment.

Unknown to her husband, Minna had opened a private account where she deposited money regularly. She intended to use the money to get her sister admitted in a university abroad. Minna was the one person who knew her sister was born to be a top scholar. And only a reputable university abroad was going to give Dorothy the chance to achieve. But with such dreadful results, how could Minna continue to hope her sister would fulfil the dream.

Dorothy confessed she had not read well for the exams and promised never to falter again. Dorothy practically crawled on her stomach during the confession, forcing Minna to feel she too was responsible. She was making the girl work too much. She now decided to limit Dorothy's domestic work to the early morning before school and Saturday mornings. The rest of the time, Dorothy would use to study. A maid who had been hired was going to do the entire babysitting and cleaning with Minna resolving to do most of the cooking.

Dorothy did bend down to study until she proposed to stay much longer in school where there were fewer distractions than in the house. Minna thought that was a brilliant proposal for she herself had seen the children running all the time to Dorothy's room to seek their auntie's attention. Minna increased Dorothy's pocket money for the girl to eat something when she was hungry and take a taxi home if it was late.

Dorothy never came home earlier than six in the evening. There were times when she even came back only when the family was about to go to bed. Tetang did not like this and tried to make Minna to stop the late coming. But when Minna sat with her sister and listened to her speak passionately about the topics she had mastered, Minna could see no justifications for her husband's fears. Her sister was once more on the path to great achievements.

From the way Dorothy spoke, Minna had every confidence that come the following academic year, her sister would be in form five, ready to scale that first barrier that led to scholarly greatness - the GCE Ordinary Level.

Minna would have drawn a different conclusion had she followed her sister up right to the school. Had she done so, she would have realised that most of the high scores on Dorothy's test papers were fabricated by Dorothy herself. She would have also noticed that Dorothy was skipping classes and there was a fat chance that she might actually never make it to form five.

The real horror story came to Minna first by a casual remark by Tetang. 'Do you realise that Dorothy is developing big?' Minna could recall the hesitant voice of her husband who was finding it difficult to call the word breast. Not only were Dorothy's glands developing 'big', but also, her whole body was getting bigger and bigger and there was this big glow on her face. Minna was ignorant about such things and failed to read the signs. She even dismissed Tetang's insinuations as being malicious.

It was not until Dorothy disappeared from the house again and stayed out for close to a week that Minna realised she should have paid closer attention to her husband's remarks. Minna had the reality thrown in her face by Dorothy's classmates. It was from them that Minna got the story of the fabricated marks, the absences from class and the worst of all, the pregnancy. Minna was so shaken that she cried for close to a week. The disappointment and shame was too much to bear.

Minna was sure she was going to stab her sister if she met her. She decided to let the girl be. She had read it somewhere that anger was a small madness. Minna however swore she was not going to cry if her sister were to die.

Weeks passed and she still did not have any word about her sister's whereabouts.

One evening, Tetang who had secretly been looking for the girl, came home with her. Immediately Dorothy saw her older sister, she ran and fell down on her knees before her, all tears and apologies. It weakened Minna's resolve. Love and compassion filled Minna

especially when Dorothy began to describe in harrowing detail how she had been lured by a notorious tycoon in town after having innocently been thrown in the man's snares by friends.

The following day, Minna was shocked to learn still from the very Dorothy that the tycoon had paid a doctor to abort the pregnancy. Minna did not know much about abortion then and she was scared her sister was going to die. She had heard too many stories about women dying as a consequence of abortion. She had to take her sister back to another doctor who after a thorough check up gave Minna a pass in good health.

It was only after that that Minna began yet again to discuss with her sister about her future. Minna had done all the forgiving and was prepared to give her sister another fresh start. But the devil had set up shop in Dorothy's heart.

**M**inna quickly turned her face towards the wall when she heard a click on the toilet door. She had not cried but had been close to it. She was very certain her eyes were red. She held herself around her shoulders praying he should not seek to find out what she had been thinking. She had to save him from the trouble she had had from her family. He had already had enough.

What Tetang had done for Dorothy was more than any in-law could do. Besides, it was shameful for Minna to be in the situation where all the anguish she ever had in her marital home only came from her own side of the family. She had never had any bother from any of her in-laws. Instead, her in-laws always worked very hard to keep her in one piece.

Minna could feel her husband's presence as he stepped out of the toilet. She could predict that he was naked but for a towel around his neck. He always did that and despite the fact that she had witnessed it for years, she still felt some tickle of embarrassment when he exposed himself like that. She was especially ill at ease this time because of the shame her family was foisting on her.

She was not sure what he was going to do next but was surprised when she heard the springs of the bed creak and she felt him spooning himself in behind her. He really did smell nice. He had had a good body scrub and mouthwash. The smell of beer was gone. Minna still felt somehow tense and failed to respond to his gestures. If only the clock could be turned back some minutes before. It was all gone. Minna thought she should explain things to him only to find herself being pulled around to face him.

The smile on his face vanished immediately he saw her own pale face. 'What's the matter Min?'

She just covered her face with a hand.

With squinted eyes, he looked ever deeper into her face, pulling the hand away. He engulfed her in his naked body, pressing his face against hers. 'Are you still mad about my friends and me?'

Minna shook her head with her eyes closed.

'Then what is the story? You don't want to receive the sincerest thank-you you have ever received from anyone?'

'Sorry, Tee,' she breathed. 'I'm not in the mood.'

'What did I do? Still mad that we didn't eat the food? You scored top marks for me, Min. I am about to snatch it in spite of the competition. They didn't eat but they were impressed. They know I am a stable man and you did it for me. By the way, I am hungry. I hope nobody touched the porcupine. I am going to the kitchen.' Tetang covered himself with a pair of shorts and dashed out of the room.

A smile crept on Minna's face. At least it was now in the records that her efforts had not totally been in vain. If Dorothy and Ma did not want her happiness, there was a man who did and this man would give her paradise if it meant him going to hell. She raised her trunk from the bed feeling somewhat elated. Why was she letting herself fall in a prison of sadness when she could be free and happy?

She skipped off the bed, stretched out the strains in her body and entered the toilet. She flinched as she stepped on water. The whole place was flooded. From the walls to the floor. It was as if a bunch of unruly children had had a water war here. Tetang always had the bad habit of splashing water all over the place after a bath. And it never bothered him to think he could mop it off. She was the one who always mopped after him. She was not going to do it this evening. Not ever again until he had learned to bathe like a civilised human being. She was going to fight with him over this.

Minna walked on her heels over to the sink where she splashed water on her face and wiped it off with her hands. She pressed her face closer to the mirror that hung over the



sink. Her eyes looked swollen and for the first time she recognised two lines cutting from beneath her eyes and heading towards her jaws. Not believing the discovery, she stretched her facial muscles and released them again. The lines were still there.

From the corner of her eyes, she caught some bright reflection on her hair in the mirror. With horror, she picked a strand of grey hair. She spread out her hair further and saw others. When did all of these appear that she was noticing them for the first time? Was she on her way to the grave? Premature aging? She had just turned forty and felt she was still too young to have lines on her face and grey hair? This certainly was due to stress, which was induced by no other persons than Dorothy and Ma. She had had lengthy conversations with Sister Samba to be aware that stress was a sure advocate of an early grave.

She could not let herself die early when her children were still very young. She had to get rid of the stress. That was what Sister Samba had advised and her advice always worked. But how was Minna going to do that? She could remember her friend telling her to make her Ma and sister real friends or keep an emotional distance from them, as the best way to deal with the stress.

Easier said than done, Minna said to herself. How could she begin to cut her closest relatives out of her emotions and still stay human? And as for making Dorothy her friend that was like chasing the wind. But Minna accepted that her friend had logic on her side and that her advice was indeed the only way out for the present.

She stepped slightly away and what she saw this time was better. The lines had disappeared and the hair that had had the touch of a romantic brush was full, rich and shimmering black. No treacherous grey. Her big, oval face looked so smooth and flushed that her once swollen eyes shone like two suns in the early morning.

She was on the plump side, yes but had a healthy weight and a good heart beat. That much the doctor had confirmed. All her features remained proportional and her teeth a picture of the ideal. She did not have anything to envy from younger women. She was still a beautiful woman and had a family that cared about her. Ma and Dorothy could go to hell.

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‘I saw only bones,’ she heard the bitter voice of her husband and rushed out of the toilet.

‘What did you expect when you were too superior to touch what I offered you?’

‘Gave it to those animals? That is meat for adult humans, not animals.’ Tetang slapped his stomach in desperation.

‘Please, don’t call my children animals. They are more human than you and those friends of yours.’

‘I think this aggression is being transferred from some strange place. It was not really meant for me. Well I think I am man enough to receive any bullet. So fire on.’

There was some mild anger in that voice and Minna recognised it especially when in sudden silence, he marched to the wardrobe and started shuffling through his clothes. Was he indeed hungry or had he noticed her family were the underlying cause of her moodiness. ‘If you are really hungry I could go and prepare something special for you,’ she said in a genuinely conciliatory tone.

‘No, don’t bother. I have just had a left-over paw.’

Minna burst out laughing. ‘A left-over paw wouldn’t satisfy a fly. I’ll make you some dodo and eggs.’ Minna made for the door.

Tetang caught her before she could go out. ‘I swear, I am not hungry. It’s nothing but long-throat. If you know the way I was dying to eat that porcupine. But I couldn’t be eating when my guests were just playing around. Even as we went out, I was only thinking about my porcu. Unfortunately, I had to stay out longer to discuss business and eat tasteless suya that the men forced on me.’

‘If they were hungry, why did they not stay and eat?’

'They were in a hurry and had to meet another colleague of theirs who was crucial in their decision making. It was a genuine situation. It was a real plus for me that they even accepted to come to my house. And as I told you, the signs are that I would get the deal.'

'All for God,' said Minna raising her hand skywards. 'You said something about thanking me, what was that about?'

'I'll tell you when we are out. The house is not conducive enough for me to tell you.'

That only aroused Minna's curiosity and she tried to dig further. All Tetang would say was 'get dressed' as he slipped into a pair of jeans.

'Where are we going?' Minna asked.

'Just go sap and I mean killer sapping.'

Minna frowned at the new vocabulary. She had heard the word before from her son and had never known it could mean something to an intelligent adult. Tetang was behaving strangely and she was going to see the end of it. Wearing faded jeans and trainers at night? Was he proposing a journey? 'I am going to sap but as a woman, I have to do it according to the occasion. You men can make do with jeans everywhere but women have to be more selective.'

'I talked of killer sapping, didn't I? Something sexy and unusual.' Tetang snorted in a mischievous way while pulling a long-sleeved shirt over his body. He had not worn the shirt for ages. It made him look casual, younger and chic. Minna knew he had some very devilish plans and that made her even more anxious about what she was supposed to wear, and what was worse, her hair was a disaster. She had programmed to visit the salon the following day. She burst out in frustration. 'Tell me where we are going, Tee. For a drink, visiting friends or where?'

'How do I look?' asked Tetang exhibiting himself for her view.

'I won't say until you tell me where we are going. I need to pick the right dress for goodness sake.'

'Okay, just hold on. I am coming.'

Tetang was out of the room before Minna could take another breath. What was this man up to? Going alone? Minna came out of the room, stood by the door, and watched as her husband disappeared into the parlour. She heard the voices of the children arguing behind the closed door of Rogers' room. They loved to argue and it was usually Rogers against the rest. His sisters usually loved crowding around him. He always had something to say or do to make them laugh or curse.

Tetang soon appeared with a black plastic bag in his hand. Minna stretched her hands to receive the bag. 'Present for me?'

Tetang hid the bag behind him and squeezed passed her into the room. She followed. He emptied the bag on the bed and Minna gasped in surprise. 'What are these?' she said rushing towards the bed. Clothes! She picked up a blouse. It was a black sleeveless bodice with bright flowers on the front. 'Ten thousand?' she saw the price tag. 'You should have given me the money to buy something better. You surely don't expect me to wear this.' She held out the blouse in front of Tetang who wore this naughty look. She had seen it coming.

'I just had to buy something for you after all the trouble. I didn't know how to choose. This one just fell in my hands. But this is in fashion, isn't it? The young woman in the boutique assured me.'

Minna knew her Tee was lying but lying for probably a good cause. 'This, Akwen would kill for. Not the likes of me. I am too old for this.'

'Says who? Me I am young and I need a young woman this night.'

Minna was baffled. Was her man losing it? His language was very strange. Had his so-called business friends given him some wild ideas that he wanted to experiment on her? Oh no, she was not going to be some guinea pig. This however, was the man of her life she was talking about. Why these kind of clothes?

God knew she liked clothes but when it came to style and fashion, she was Mrs modest to conservative. Everybody knew that. Even her husband knew that and he respected her

for that. Why the sudden change of taste? She was not into pieces of cloth that exhibited her flesh to the whole world. Why was he pushing her to venture into strange territory? She removed the negligee and slipped on the blouse, watching him keenly. The slightest derisive twist on his face and she would shred the blouse into pieces.

He seemed to have read her mind and nodded but turned his face away when he could not resist a creeping smile. He picked up the skirt and tossed it over to her. She spread it out over her chest and burst out in laughter. She could not believe it. 'This is for free women, Tee, not respectable married women.'

'I don't need a married woman this night. Look at me. Do I look married? I am unattached. I unattached, you unattached and we make the perfect pair. We can then get attached.'

'Stop talking nonsense, Tee. There is something severely wrong with your brains this night. Are you sure you are not drunk?' She lowered the skirt by her side.

'Perfectly sober. Try me. Ask any question and see whether I will not answer like a normal person.'

'You want to go and keep me under the street lights, why?' She hated the smirk on his face. It was as if all she had been saying meant nothing.

'Even in the dark, you'll still look irresistible. Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh.'

'I give up, Tee. I know you are crazy. Don't blame me if I also get crazy and get picked up by another man.' Minna entered into the skirt, defeated. It was a shiny, pink skirt that went way above the knees and hugged her frame though moderately.

'Look at me, Mr Fru Tetang. No better than those women around Nkwen Park in the night.' Minna made a spin and tried to talk herself into her husband's eccentric mood.

'So you know about Nkwen Park?'

'That's not the issue sir. The issue is that you have converted your wife into a cheap slut. And Don't blame me if men start looking at me.'

Tetang laughed. 'They can look, have the most lustful thoughts of their lives, but they can't touch. Let's go.'

Minna still thought it was one big joke. Maybe some light-hearted bedroom drama with them the actors being their only audience. But Minna still had some work to do. She pointed at her hair to Tetang and jumped into the toilet. She went straight to the mirror. Her face was still not the best. The eyes were still swollen and her whole face looked shallow. She forced a smile but it instead made her look like a scarecrow. Her hair also could be better notwithstanding the brushing Tetang had lovingly done.

Minna gritted her teeth and made quiet curses. She stretched herself on her toes in order to see as much of her clothes as possible. She could see as far as her knees and that was good enough to make her utter more curses especially at her husband. Such clothes were for the likes of Dorothy and not her.

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The thought of Dorothy made her whole body shrink in depression. She sat on the edge of the toilet bowl and carried her head in cupped hands. Why was she cursed with such a sister? After Dorothy's first shocker, Minna did realise she had to be more proactive in instilling in her sister a more responsible mind-set.

After innumerable one-to-one sessions with Dorothy, ruminating over the evil of what had happened, Minna then sought the assistance of the pastor. He was a quiet, affable man with the most down-to-earth manners and had legendary success in counselling both believers and non-believers. The man of God actually succeeded in getting Dorothy to say regular prayers and eventually joining a Christian youth group.

Minna started counting her eggs again. The change she saw in her sister was so remarkable that she thought it was permanent. No more late nights, Dorothy studied in the house and started once again scoring top marks. She never missed any of her group

meetings but that never affected her scores. She worked as hard as she used to and soon found herself being once again the key person in the house. Minna, her husband and all the children depended on Auntie Dorothy for this or that.

Dorothy finally made her GCE and with excellent grades then it snapped once more. Just a couple of days after the results were published, Minna had this strange call while in school from a man who claimed he was living with Dorothy and intended marrying her. Minna was so shocked that she had to look over the calendar to ascertain it was not 1st April. It could not possibly be. The day before the call, they were all in the house singing and dancing over Dorothy's very good performance. There had not been the slightest impression that Dorothy was about to pull another wicked trick on them.

Minna ran to the room Dorothy now shared with Akwen. There she discovered to her amazement that all that was left about Dorothy were some old shoes and blouses Dorothy had long abandoned. Minna wanted some explanations from Akwen. Akwen revealed that she had asked her aunt why she was packing her clothes. Auntie Dorothy had replied that she was just trying to keep things in order. And to wipe out any lingering fear from the child's mind, Dorothy folded the child's own clothes and packed them in a suitcase.

What more evidence did Minna want? Minna ran straight to the police and made a report about her sister and the strange call. Unfortunately for her, she did not have the number of the man that could help the police to start tracing. The country then was still under the throes of a dysfunctional telephone network. Though the police tried to assure her that they would get to the bottom of the story, Minna went away knowing it was all left to her to find her sister.

After all the changes she had seen in the girl, Minna did not want to think Dorothy had planned the disappearance act. Dorothy was the innocent victim of a manipulator's scheme. Minna had to inform their parents first in order that together they could take joint action.

Their parents had retired to Widikum, not in peace but almost in pieces. A couple of years before retirement, Pa had married a second wife claiming a younger woman would take better care of him once he was retired. Of course Ma did put up a fight to maintain her exclusive claim to her husband for decades but without success. The outcome was constant tension in the new polygamous home.

Minna did not expect to meet any loving atmosphere on arrival but what shocked her most were her parents' reaction to the bad news. Pa, who used to be like a watch-tiger behind her daughters told Minna bluntly to take the matter to Ma who Pa claimed had not brought up Dorothy well. Ma on her own part saw no problem with Dorothy getting married like her older sister. Ma was so proud to hear her second daughter was getting married that she went boasting in the compound.

Minna could not believe what was happening. Her mother was never like that before. She was the one who used to fight hard to ensure her daughters especially, were well-behaved and well-educated. Minna was speechless that Ma could be rejoicing that Dorothy, who was yet to have any meaningful education, was getting married. 'But you don't even know the man,' Minna remembered shouting at her mother.

'Dorothy is a responsible girl and I know she will take a responsible decision. I trust you my daughters. I am the one who brought you up.' Those were Ma's solemn words that left Minna wondering whether the tension with Pa had not messed up her mother's brains.

Minna returned to Bamenda more confused than she had been before. She however resolved to fold her hands like her parents even though her heart burned everyday. She was the first line of responsibility over Dorothy and should anything happen to Dorothy, Minna was the one everybody was going to blame. Dorothy had been handed over to her like her child. Tetang kept reminding her of that but Minna was too full of anger and disappointment to act.

Minna did not hear a word from her sister for months. It was just as she was about to give up on Dorothy when she had this letter from Ma, all the way from Widikum, begging

her to go and rescue her sister from the claws of a brute in far away Kumba. In the next couple of minutes, Minna was in bus on the way to Kumba.

It was an all-night journey that Minna found herself being plunged through dark, tropical forest and over the roughest tracks that did not deserve to be called roads. It was her first ever journey to Kumba but the person who had written the letter for Ma had taken the pains to make all the vivid descriptions required for one to make her way round a new place.

Minna got to the rain-soaked, muddy town of Kumba early in the morning. Squelching through mud, soaked right to the bones she managed and asked her way to Dorothy's house. It was not as much as a house as some assemblage of termite-infested timber pieces and disintegrating metal sheets.

If that was shocking then it was not a fraction as shocking as what Minna saw as she unlatched the lock on the door. Dorothy was lying on a thin mat on an earth floor, twisting herself over her stomach and grunting in pain. Minna dropped her bag on the floor and immediately jumped on her sister. Dorothy's eyes were so white that Minna thought it was about to end. Minna wailed and in a couple of minutes, the tiny shack was crowded.

Dorothy was rushed to a hospital where she was diagnosed with anaemia, following a crude abortion. That was part of a tale of violence and abuse that had been meted out on her by her sweet lover. Her body was covered in fresh and old scars and she was just a package of bones.

Dorothy had been lying in the shack for three days and all that had passed into her stomach was her saliva. Minna wept as Dorothy recounted the tortures she had had to endure just because she could not bear the shame of having to run back to the once comfortable home she had in Bamenda. A home she had proudly run away from.

Once again, compassion and love overcame Minna and she took her sister back to Bamenda after picking the heavy hospital bill that covered two weeks of intensive medical care. Dorothy went back to Bamenda with just the dress that Minna bought for her in Kumba. Nothing from the man. Not even a piece of jewel to remind her of him. Not once did the man who had left her in the poor condition even bother to check on her.

Dorothy spent a full year in the house, doing nothing. All Minna expected from her was to recuperate and seek full forgiveness for her sins. She did repent for the Pastor and the group finally accepted her apologies and readmitted her into their activities.

But this was just part of the vicious cycle.

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'Are you having a baby or what?' Tetang's voice made Minna jump until she nearly slipped on the very water that Tetang had not bothered to mop off. Minna rushed to the window and pressed her hair down to the back of her neck. She dabbed some pencil-black on her eyelashes and smeared some lipstick that had stayed in the toilet box forever. When she was through, she went out and stood in front of Tetang who was sitting on the edge of the bed.

'Tasty,' Tetang nodded in satisfaction. He got up and held her for a round of bottle dance. This took Minna completely by surprise but she found herself responding to his lead. 'I said you were crazy,' she said fighting as best as she could to feel at ease. She was still worried not being sure of what to expect once she stepped out with the skimpy outfits. 'Where did you say we were going now, Tee?' she made a last plea.

'The nightclub.'

Minna froze. The dance stopped. She twisted out of Tetang's grip and leaned against the wall by the door. A moment later, she left the wall and sat on the bed and began to squeeze her fingers.

'No, no, no Tee.' She shook her head with some vehemence. 'No nightclub for me. That place where my students go? They way they talk about it frightens me. Can't go and be

bumping against my students. I will be out of place, Tee. They will ask what this grandma is doing here. Then in class on Monday, there will be a caricature of me on the board with my fat bum and scanty clothes. Don't make me commit the greatest error of my life. Nightclub? Wriggling and wiggling about like a worm? And dressed like this? I can't even dance. You are free to go alone.'

Tetang threw his hands on his waist to take a good look at her. He just could not believe it. She was the one who used to be hot about dancing when they just started out. It was true they had not gone out dancing for a very long time. The simple reason was that they had been concentrating on building up a family and making money. That should not in anyway kill the spirit for some one-off indulgence even if it was a bit eccentric. They were still warm-blooded human beings and reserved the right to let the good times roll, sometimes. All work without play could make even a very loving marriage dull. Tetang bit his lips in mischief then came and sat by her.

*'Happy birthday to us, Happy birthday to us.'*

Minna looked at him, confused. 'Whose birthday?' she asked with all curiosity.

'Ours now? The day this marriage was born. And remember, it's a day we go crazy.'

'Ma mami yeh!' cried Minna carrying her head in her hands. 'You remembered, Tee. I am the one who always does. Not you. What happened to me?' She got up from the bed, exuding some new confidence. 'Take me baby, to wherever. I'm yours.' She offered him her hand and he spun her around like the queen of the dance floor.

After slotting on some open, high-heeled sandals, she rose from the bed like a princess, raising her right hand towards her prince. Tetang grabbed the hand with both of his and planted a gentle kiss on it. Then he led her out of the room. Tetang was right. They had made the undertaking of doing the silliest things on their wedding anniversary though other commitments often made them forget. This time around, Tetang had not forgotten. They both went out of their room, arm in arm, singing their best song - Dorothy's song.

*Swing lo,  
Sweet Chariots...*

When they got to the parlour, Minna froze again. Akwen and Rogers were on the dining table studying. The children would have concentrated on their work had they not heard the sudden stir.

'What are you doing here?' said Minna, not sure how she succeeded to speak. She saw the wide stares and knew immediately that she had just lost her moral authority over her children. What with her everyday whining about the need for modesty and good taste. She wanted to pull her arm out of the amorous arm-lock but Tetang held it firm.

'You look cool Mami,' said Rogers, his eyes sparkling like new mushrooms.

'I didn't ask your opinion? It's very late and you people should be in your beds.' Minna wished she could disappear.

'The clock is in front of you Mami. 8:50 and today is Friday. For the weekends we have till 11, remember?' Akwen had that telling look on her face.

Akwen just had to be clever. Minna bit her lips with some anger. But her daughter was speaking the truth. Minna had lost part of her senses.

'And remember Rogers is an O level student and Akwen is a mature student.' That was Tetang, not doing much to lift his own wife out of the jam. He was probably enjoying it, thought Minna, hating the grin on his face.

'Mami, aren't you feeling cold?' Typical of Akwen to take the moral high ground. She just had to add further fuel. 'Love your clothes anyway.'

Minna did not respond. She simply bolted ahead, dragging her man along. The damage was already done and there was no way she could mitigate it under the circumstance.

'You didn't lock the gate,' Minna said to her husband when the car had gone some distance away.

Tetang pressed the brakes but was reluctant about going back. 'If we knew we would have told Rogers to lock up after us. I'm sure he would use his good senses to check on the gate.'

'Rogers checking on the gate at night? Get serious, Tee. That boy is the giant who shrivels at the sound of a cricket. We've not gone far. Let's just go back and lock it.'

'Think thieves might take advantage? Places have been calm this year. Nothing will happen.'

'If you say so. But it's better being safe than sorry.'

Tetang pressed the car forward only to bring it to a sudden, screeching halt. A woman who was carrying a baby against her chest had suddenly appeared in front of him right in the middle of the road. She actually froze at the sight of the car. Then she ran and dashed across the road.

Tetang scrambled in fear and anger out of the car. He wanted to find out if he had hit the woman or to scold at her for being careless on the road. He was surprised to see the woman rushing away in the opposite direction as if nothing had happened. She walked at a brisk, steady pace that was not in consonance with her bulky frame.

'Hey,' Tetang called, rather belatedly. The woman kept going. She was wrapped all over in flowing cloth making it difficult to identify her. That was probably deliberate, Tetang thought rather severely. The way she was moving gave the impression she was going somewhere urgently. Running away or on the road to commit an atrocity? A life or death situation? Tetang wondered, sighed and mounted back behind the wheel.

'Anybody you know?' asked Minna flatly.

'Must be some desperate type. With a baby at night?'

'Think it's a stolen baby she's running away with? Things have been happening and this wouldn't surprise me.' That was Minna's candid opinion.

'You know, you've just made me realise that is probably why the woman is in such haste. She must have stolen the baby. I think I should turn around and follow her. It is my duty as a citizen.'

'Mr Vigilante,' quipped Minna in derision. 'People who don't mind their own business often get others minding their business. Forget it, Tee. Poor baby.' Minna concluded with a sigh of sympathy.

'If you really feel for the baby then we should go after the woman.'

'And what are we going to do with the baby if she dumps it with us?'

'Hand it over to the police,' replied Tetang negotiating the bend where there was a public tap.

'Ah deny me,' Minna bellowed. 'I am not prepared to answer tricky questions from the police and lawyers who have the propensity to twist things which may end in us getting a criminal sentence. No. The police, lawyers, judges and I don't mix. Talking about babies, I wonder how Dorothy is coping with hers.'

'So she finally had the baby?' said Tetang surprised.

'But I told you now? The baby should be some six to eight months now.'

'What happened that she decided to keep the baby this time? A doctor warned her about any further abortion?'

'Maybe she feared it was her last vital egg.'

Tetang laughed. 'Your mother has her work cut out for her. Dorothy is surely going to leave the baby with her.'

That is Ma's funeral. I warned them. I even advised Dorothy to have an abortion. I knew any child she brings into this world would suffer. Ma said I was a murderer. She knows of the numerous abortions Dorothy has committed but she never calls her a



murderer. It is I the murderer. I am always the villain and never Dorothy as far as Ma is concerned.' Minna sighed and shook her head in despair. 'God will pay them one day.'

'Forget about that for now,' said Tetang, realising Minna was beginning to get tense. He slotted in a cassette and out came the soothing voice of Bebe Manga in a lush ballad. The couple kept quiet, allowing the vibes to melt into their bloodstreams. It took sometime for Minna to let go completely. What actually did it for her was the next number. It was a popular Manu Dibango's old-timer. She sang along:

*Sango Yesu Christo ...Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Then came one soulful seducer:

*Girl you are to me, all that a woman should be...*

This one was hypnotic and it brought all the body's metabolic processes to a stop. Minna found her head resting against Tetang's shoulders wishing it could always be like that. Tetang was the only one who knew how and when to touch those buttons that brought all the fighting forces in her body to a peaceful lull. She remembered those early days when Tetang used to treat her like a pet, always taking her out and buying her gifts. She really did make him suffer before finally surrendering to his charms. She could remember it all.

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Minna first noticed him when she had presented her final dissertation at the teacher training college. He had clapped unconsciously, entranced as he had said by her riveting presentation. And only he alone had clapped in the whole hall. After the presentation, she saw the thin, baby-looking man panting after her. When he saw the acerbic look in her eyes, he forgot what he wanted to say. All he did manage to say and with much difficulty was, 'good style.' Minna had burst out laughing and the nervous man had taken flight without revealing his true intentions. .

But that was just the beginning. He managed somehow to discover where she lived. She noticed him passing several times by their house in Bamenda where her father worked like the assistant postmaster. Her father used to be wild and everyone who knew him had to be careful about accosting any of his daughters. Tetang had probably got the story and that was why he always passed on the opposite side of the road. He however ploughed on, waiting for his moment.

Minna used to avoid him. She would rush back into the house whenever she saw him passing. First she was aware her father was arranging to marry her off to his friend's son and she was not sure she could defy her father. More importantly however, she knew her father would kill her if she saw her talking with a strange man. Also, she was afraid the man chasing her could be the kind on the look out for some cheap adventure. So she kept dodging.

Eventually, Tetang cornered her one day. He had just been recruited as a young Engineer in the Public Works Department. He begged to accompany his boss to the house of the assistant postmaster who was hosting a party for a group of civil servants. The boss gave the permission and Tetang was one of the earliest to arrive.

Minna was shocked to see him in their house and could not understand how he had done it. She tried all she could to keep away from him but the young man really meant business. He kept eyeing her and throwing a word or two whenever she passed by him.

Then the crucial moment came. Emboldened by half a glass of whisky, he followed her into the kitchen where she was going to get more glasses. Her parents were busy chatting with the guests. Dorothy who had been watching all the goings-on, followed also. Minna was bent over a tray, moping it with a dry napkin as Dorothy entered.



'Let me get the glasses,' Dorothy proposed, seizing the tray from the unsuspecting hands of her older sister. Before Minna could react, Dorothy had gone to the far corner of the kitchen where the glasses had been kept to dry. Minna then moved to the sink to concentrate on washing yet more glasses.

'Why don't you take your guest outside let me wash the other glasses.' That was pompous Dorothy again, rushing to her sister's side and nudging her with an elbow. Minna turned and looked at Tetang who was standing by the door connecting the main house, his hands crossed behind like a chastised pupil. Minna knew she was trapped. With her head bowed, she walked out of the kitchen to the backyard. Tetang gave a grateful smile to the very young Dorothy and followed Minna.

The place was dark and they were alone. It was a propitious moment for Tetang to present his case. It was a five-minute presentation, done with a halting but sincere voice. Minna had sensed all along what the young man wanted and even though she liked him a bit, she knew it all was going to end in doom.

The one thing Tetang was however glad for was that Minna was not as hostile as she had been to him the first time he had tried to talk to her. That encouraged Tetang to keep pursuing his heart's wishes despite the fact that he got to discover there was overwhelming competition.

Minna really did admire his boyish looks and simplicity but felt frustrated that her parents were adamant about the other man who had never lifted a finger to fight for her hand like Tetang was doing. He was going to have her on a platter of gold. What however won it for Tetang was a shocking discovery that Minna made and in the presence of the mouthy Dorothy. Minna caught the man who had been chosen for her holding hands intimately with another woman. Minna had wanted to run away but not Dorothy.

Dorothy went and stood in front of the woman and called her a prostitute. The man was so furious that he slapped Dorothy. That was when Minna fell on him and rained all kinds of insult on him. That very day, Minna said yes to Tetang and never looked back. Tetang was just the perfect match for her. With Dorothy's support, their parents yielded to Minna's wishes. Minna was forever grateful for what she said was divine intervention. Tetang turned out to be the most devoted husband and father any woman could wish for.

Minna found herself laughing, forgetting the earth had made several revolutions since those innocent days.

Tetang was curious and wanted to share in the joke.

'Good style,' remember?

'Shut up,' he said, swinging the car into the well-lit yard of the club.

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Minna felt her muscles contract as the car drifted further towards the club. The courage she had managed to marshal at the house deserted her. Here was three-dimensional, practical reality, and the theoretical psyching she had done in the house was not enough preparation. She could not recall the last time she went to any nightclub.

The first three years of marriage, they had been frequent visitors but since their second child came, she lost all the taste for outlandish pleasures, concentrating all her energies on raising her children, looking after her man and earning some money for the family. Her happiness lay in having peace at home and seeing her children grow healthily.

The odd parties where occasional dancing was organised, she participated without any qualms. The crowd constituted usual friends or colleagues. Most of these persons were her peers and their music and dance styles were familiar. They could understand each other and behaved predictably well. But the nightclub was quite a different world. All kinds of young people with their funny styles and rude manners went there and nobody could restrict them. Minna had even heard how in recent times young people kissed very intimately in the open and exposed unspeakable parts of their bodies.

She was not going to survive this. Not especially if she met her students there. She had already lost her moral influence over her children. She could not afford to have this happen with her own students. Everybody in school respected her for her neat personality and high moral standards. She was a prominent member of the school disciplinary council. How could she be seen in such a vulgar place?

'Tee please, don't make me go in there,' she begged as Tetang parked the car under a palm tree. 'At least let me go and change this skirt.'

'Don't worry. After a couple of dances, you'll no longer feel cold.' Tetang jumped out of the car.

Who told him she was feeling cold? She was about to protest when someone opened her door.

'Mr Tee and madam. Good to see you.' It was one of Tetang's colleagues at the office though a much younger man. Minna felt frustrated but cornered. She could not see the man's face well but she had the impression the man was looking at her in a telling way. She let the man help her out of the car while Tetang concentrated on winding up the glasses and locking the doors.

'Saw the way your colleague looked at me?' Minna said to her husband after the man had gone. 'Like he wanted to eat me.'

'Who wouldn't like to eat hot cake,' said Tetang grinning.

'Stop it this moment, Tee or else I will just walk away and pick a taxi.'

'The security men at the gate don't like to see beautiful women. They won't let you pass like that. Let's go.' He seized her by the hand and pulled her towards the bright lights closer to the club. She had no choice but to behave more graciously as she was conscious people could see her better. It was not an easy endeavour keeping steady. She felt her legs wobbling as she went and if Tetang was not holding her hand, she was certain she would have fallen.

She tensed further when she recognised a colleague. Lisha was a much younger woman, yet to be married. And she looked relaxed. How she did it, Minna could not tell. She was walking with some man just in front. Probably some dirty boyfriend, Minna thought in contempt. This woman did not have a good reputation and here was Minna sharing the same grounds with her.

If Minna was embarrassed about her own clothes, then what the colleague was wearing was scandalous. She wore a see-through mini shorts with her G-string in clear view. Her top was a piece of brief cloth that rose just above her breast and ended above her navel. Minna could swear she was not on the same staff as this woman. This was a teacher for goodness sake. Teachers had to show the good example. Kettle calling the pot black, Minna reminded herself when she became conscious again of her own peculiar attire.

Minna tried to slow down to give further distance between her and Lisha. But the woman turned around and the first person she recognised was her senior colleague. There was no iota of fear on her face but pure delight. She pulled away from her escort and fell on Minna without restraint. 'You look gorgeous sister,' she said looking at Minna from head to toe. And Minna knew she did not want to say what she obviously intended to say at first. Fancy seeing you in a place like this, Mrs clean.

'You look even better Lisha,' Minna lied and forced a nervous smile on her face. 'Know my husband of course.'

'We all know him,' Lisha said casting a flirtatious glance at Tetang and extending a long slim hand. She did not introduce her escort who still stood away, waiting for her. Minna just knew he was a casual companion. Lisha should not start on her husband or else Minna would have her killed. Lisha was the Dorothy type who did not have any qualms about flirting with anything in trousers even if the man was a leper.

'See you later.' Lisha gave a killer wave and bounced away to her escort, whipping her generous posterior with intentional flair. Minna's eyes caught Tetang's and they both smiled. They both understood what was going on.

Minna hung closely to her man as he led her down a wide staircase on the sides of which were pairs of young people, some of them even children, ogling each other in the open. She tried to keep her head straight in order not to see the disgusting decadence. But everywhere her eyes went, they were there, right up to exchanging saliva. Not the slightest fear that people were watching.

These people could not possibly have ever entered a church house. Minna prayed the syndrome should never catch her children. Could not possibly happen. Her children feared God and knew such careless intimacy could lead to AIDS.

The first thing that hit her when she entered the nightclub proper was the stifling fumes of cigarette. It hit her in the nose and she felt as if somebody had poked two fingers right into the deep of her nostrils in one sweeping movement. She slapped a hand over the nose and sneezed. She wanted to run out but Tetang held her firmly, tapping her back to encourage her.

The sound of the music boomed right into her chest in a rhythm that seemed to force her heart to jump with frenzy. This was not very good. The hall flashed with lights of all colours but the atmosphere was murky and Minna could not see where she was going. She just hung behind Tetang like one helpless, blind child. She saw the shapes of human beings bobbing up and down to the rhythm of the music but could not see any distinct human features. What was she doing in a place like this? Tetang had a lot to answer for.

Then there was the heat. And people were still dancing under such heat? As she followed Tetang closely, her eyes began to see better and she began to make out faces and silhouettes of furniture. That was better, she tried to assure herself. Where Tetang chose for them to sit was even much better. Cool air blew out from some magic hole in the wall, pushing away the cigarette fumes and making it easier for her to breathe.

She collapsed next to her husband in a well-padded chair, shedding all her weight on the chair. She wanted to talk to Tetang and asked him a million questions. But the music was too loud for her voice to succeed. Besides, she was not sure if it was good behaviour shouting in a nightclub. She sat quiet, waiting for Tetang to make the next move. He was the expert.

Five minutes later, cool makossa boomed from the speakers and Minna found herself whipping a shoulder. Though this was more a spontaneous move to fight fear, the sound also inspired some wave of recognition. This one, her children were hot about and were always singing and dancing to it. The fever had somehow caught her. Tetang noticing it, caught her by the hand and lifted her out of her seat. As they approached the dance floor, Minna began to recognise some faces; Lisha, her husband's colleague, and two of her students. But for Tetang's pull, she would have remained immobilized like a statue.

Minna turned her face away each time she recognised somebody. But it was all a futile fight for every turn met with another familiar face. This got her very tense until she could not tell whether her steps were in tandem with the music. She finally decided to focus on her husband or the wall. She wished she could be like Tetang who was smooching away, turning around and moving up and down as if he was doing his last dance. She had not seen him make such ecstatic moves for a long time

Then a stirring salsa number spilled out. Just what Tetang needed to set Minna free. If this one was not going to get Minna unwound, then he had to contend himself that he had a robot for a wife. He seized her by the waist and began to roll around with her like the other dancers. He twisted her with one hand then two, watching out and intensifying the moves as Minna's stepped out of her closet. Before long, Minna was floating around with little effort from her partner. A ballerina, a dancing queen, the diva on the stage letting loose steps and bends that defied the laws of physics.

All those moves she had when she was still a flat-belly spinster were still there, lodged in her bones and time had done very little to wipe them out. Time had not only preserved

them, it had also refined them. Tetang held her close and told her through his eyes, 'who were you trying to fool'. But she did not want to stop, not even when the music changed to reggae.

*Buffalo soldier ...in the heart of America*

And she sang along, pointing her right forefinger ceiling-ward. No more self-consciousness, no more reservations about who was looking at her and enjoying the freedom she had from the flimsy gear. She was back to being a young, agile girl, living in a free world. This was ecstasy.

She stopped only because Tetang could no longer go on. He was already having cramps in his legs and a headache. Besides, he was dying for a drink. Minna panted in delight as she fell back in her seat. With a loud voice, she greeted a couple who had just arrived. She would have ignored them after had she not noticed that the woman kept staring at her.

Did the woman know her? Minna shook her head in emphatic denial. Peculiar about the couple was the stark contrast between them. The woman was bigger than the man in size and height and was so light-skinned that Minna could see it through the dim setting of the club. Intensive skin bleaching, Minna decided.

The woman had low-cut hair, permed and bleached though Minna could not tell the colour. The hair looked nice all right but Minna did not think the woman was the kind of person she could trust. Not a woman of virtue. The woman spoke with a sharp, angry voice like someone who was perpetually protesting about everything around her, her whole mass shivering from head to toe.

Sitting with his hands placed on his laps like an obedient child, the man cut the sorry picture of a famished lamb that could die at the slightest touch. He looked as wretched and thin as a man who had come to the club for his last taste of life before his impending end. Was he the younger brother of the woman or just a case of charity? Minna wondered with scorn. He should be going to the hospital, not to the club.

But why was Minna feeling uncomfortable about the couple? The woman should stop eyeing her. Whether the man had some terminal disease or not was none of Minna's business. Her business was Tetang coming with their drinks. She was thirsty and was thus happy to see him winding his way towards her. Minna could now focus her attention on her man and the drinks and ignore her strange neighbours. They drank quietly, Minna a soda while Tetang had a double shot of spirit. Minna later invited her man to join her on the floor. This time, they danced for close to an hour before returning to their seats.

When they returned, something strange had occurred. The drinks that they had barely touched, was gone and Minna did not like it. 'Who could have taken our drinks?' she asked angrily. 'And I'm very thirsty.'

'Never mind, we'll get other drinks,' said Tetang who was not comfortable with Minna's loud voice.

'But this is not fair.' Minna said to one waiter who was passing by. 'Somebody stole our drinks.'

'I am not the one,' said the waiter rudely.

'But you people are responsible for securing people's drinks.'

'You should have handed your drinks to the police before going to the floor.' The waiter left, frowning.

'Heard what he said to me?' Minna fired at Tetang.

'I told you to forget it. We can buy other drinks. Sit, I'm coming.' Tetang was slightly angry and hurriedly left to buy other drinks.

Minna sat, sulking. She hated rude people. This was her last time ever stepping into this nightclub. The couple! An idea struck her. Where are the couple? They must know something about the drinks. She stood up to see if she could see them on the dance floor. She stretched and turned her neck around to no avail. Her sight was much better now, after

the inspiring dance. The couple must have stolen their drinks. They did not look like people who had the extra cash to pay for the expensive drinks in the club. She had no doubt in her mind that these people were the thieves.

She sat down to wait for Tetang who was taking more time than she expected. The woman! The chubby woman! She was hit by sudden recognition. The woman in the taxi who had paid her taxi fare! Where was she? This was an occasion for Minna to thank her and perhaps pay back her five hundred francs. Minna cursed herself for thinking such a kind woman could have been a thief.

The woman had definitely recognised her and that was why she had been staring hoping Minna would also recognise her. Minna wished she had not been too quick in judging the couple. This was probably why her brains had failed to function properly. This would have been a good occasion to pay back for kindness or at least letting the woman know she was grateful. Minna begged God to forgive her for paying good with evil.

'Tee, saw the couple who were sitting with us,' she said to Tetang who had just returned.

'They have left. I saw them leaving when I left to get these drinks. She even waved at me.'

'Weh, I know the woman,' said Minna. 'A kind woman. I would have offered them a drink. She must be thinking I am evil.'

'The man didn't look well to me. I am sure he was tired and wanted to go home. You know the woman?' Tetang asked as an afterthought.

'She paid my taxi fare today when my money got lost in my bag.'

'That bag,' said Tetang whipping a finger in Minna's face. 'I told you it would get you in trouble. I hope you've finally made up your mind to throw it away.'

'If you promise to buy me another one.' A soft, bluesy old-timer was whistling on the floor.

'Chei, you women! What do you do with so many bags? You mean you are not yet satisfied with the ones in the house?'

'I beg, leave dat talk make I dance.' Minna dragged him back to the dance floor. She had finally triumphed over all the impeding self-consciousness.

They danced until the wee hours. When the first dawn rays were already shooting from the back of the mountain ridges beyond Bamenda Station.

'It was a real treat.' That was the last thing Minna said to her husband before closing her eyes as he was driving out of the yard of the club.

“Mami! Mami! Mami!” Minna at first heard it like she was dreaming. But the persistence and aching rap of the door pulled her hesitantly but surely from unreality.

‘Which kind balluck children be these?’ she cried twisting her face.

‘Mami! Mami! Mami!’ It went again, ripping her senses apart.

‘What do you devils want from me?’ I am not your slave. If you are hungry, go and eat whatever you want. If you want but money, go and borrow and I’ll pay whatever interest they ask.’

‘Mami, it’s very important.’

Minna finally recognised Akwen’s voice. ‘There’s nothing more important than your parents getting a well deserved rest. I have told you people time without number that when your parents are resting, you children should go far away from them. Did we commit a crime by having you people?’

Akwen laughed gruffly. ‘This is an emergency.’

‘Go to the hospital.’

‘Leave us alone.’ Tetang added his own plea.

There was silence and both adults were happy parental authority seemed to have triumphed. But it was brief.

‘She sounded serious, Min. You better go and check’

‘If you feel strongly about it, then you go.’

‘The last time I checked, Mami refers to you.’

‘And the last time I checked, it was because of you that I became Mami. When you snatched me away from my parents, I was called Minna not Mami. So Mami also refers to you too. You go.’

‘Remember you are the one who kept me in that club. I wanted to come back and have my good, normal sleep. But you had to be the last one on the dance floor. You said you had inexhaustible energy, didn’t you? Go out there and show it. Energizer!’ Tetang turned his face away.

‘You are the one who forced me to go to that club in the first place, despite all my pleas. I beg just go take care of your daughter and leave me alone.’ Minna turned on her stomach, folding her hands under her neck.

‘It must have to do with women’s things.’

‘And who says only women have to deal with women’s things.’ Minna snapped back.

‘Mami!’ Akwen called again, this time even louder.

Tetang turned and looked at his wife with a sneer on his face. ‘I rest my case.’

‘Lazy father,’ said Minna scrambling off the bed and grumbling in anger.

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Minna’s eyes were half closed as she staggered to the door. She almost forgot she was flimsily clad when she began to turn the key. She stepped back, wrenched a wrappa that was on her dressing chair and covered herself right up to her armpits. ‘What’s it?’ she quipped, opening the door only slightly.

‘Just come and see, Mami.’

‘See what? You people are hungry?’

‘I have given enough to everybody Mami but just come.’ Akwen caught her mother’s hand.

Minna resisted. ‘If you don’t tell me right now, I am going back to sleep. Don’t take me for granted girl. I am a very tired woman.’

‘But Mami, it’s almost midday.’

‘Shock me with your lies. I can’t read a watch.’

Akwen laughed. 'Look at the watch on my wrist.' She raised her watch in her mother's face. 'And if you don't still believe me, look out through your window.'

Minna squinted at the watch and was shocked. She felt stupid. 'Well, whatever the time is, that is immaterial. I still need sleep. Good night and never come here again.'

'Mami, please come and see then you can come back and sleep forever.' That was Rita, thirteen and Minna's third child. She was a quiet but serious girl who was always amongst the top five in her class. She was the most religious in nest and could always be counted upon for the truth. Minna decided to go in as a concession to her pious daughter

Minna went after her daughters down the corridor, grumbling. 'If this is not important, you girls are going to get me.'

Akwen opened the door to the guest room and the girls made way for their mother to enter. 'Why do I have to enter first?' Minna suddenly thought the children had one anniversary surprise for her. She could not forget the surprise of two years ago. She had never imagined that the children knew about their wedding anniversary and to even think of offering them a present. They, the concerned used to forget to celebrate their own anniversaries.

That evening, she and her husband had just retired to bed thinking the children were fast asleep. They had not been in bed for thirty minutes when Minna's cell phone rang. She had forgotten as always to put it off. When Minna picked up the phone, she got the strangest message. 'There are thieves in your parlour.' The voice was strange and she immediately thought it was the voice of a concerned neighbour. She woke up Tetang and passed the phone to him. The very message was repeated.

Tetang grabbed a tennis racket he had not used for ages, and in his pyjamas, sneaked out of the room. Crouching, he went down the corridor where some light was filtering in from the parlour. Minna peeked from the corner of the door, trembling and praying. When Tetang pushed the blind that separated the parlour from the corridor, a very bright light blazed on his face and this was immediately followed by a burst of young voices:

'Happy anniversary!'

Minna's heart nearly shattered into smithereens before she understood what was going on. The children had played a fast one on them but it was a most lovely anniversary present. Rogers was the mastermind behind it all.

'You people are up to one of those your games again, aren't you?' Minna eyed the girls suspiciously.

'I don't know what you are talking about Mami,' said Akwen entering the room to assure her mother. Minna followed, her nerves on full alert. Rita went in the last.

'What?' Minna bellowed, looking around the room. The room that had always been reserved for guests looked empty and quiet.

In silence, Akwen went and lifted the corner of the blanket on the bed, her face a mixture of fear and anticipation. Her eyes were on her mother.

'A baby! Our anniversary present?' Minna said looking from Akwen to the baby.

'Yes Mami, a baby. But as for the present, I don't know about that. Why can't you take me serious?' Akwen's apprehension transformed to anger.

Minna sneered at her daughter still struggling to decipher her true intentions. She still thought it was another gambit to get her further worked up before the finale. She stood still, waiting for the explosion and the rest of the children to jump out from different hideouts. 'It's a dummy right? Got a dummy from the Home Economics lab didn't you? And you thought it's funny. Big deal.'

'Mami, this is no dummy. It's a baby. A live baby.' Rita took her turn but this time around, Minna was not convinced by the voice of her devout daughter. Then the baby rolled to the other side and emitted a brief cry.

'It is a baby indeed,' said Minna stepping forward and looking closer. Then she touched the face, and felt for the heartbeat. 'It's no dummy. You girls are right.' There was this uncertain excitement on her face. She picked up the baby and rocked him from side to side



like a pendulum. She pressed him slightly against her chest and was suddenly conquered by love and compassion. She did not know where the sentiments came from but the effect was powerful. The power was such that it suppressed all her feeling of exhaustion.

Minna found herself humming a lullaby, then Dorothy's song. She spun around with the baby as she sang while her daughters looked on in stupefaction. She pressed the child again against her chest and smacked his handsome face with a series of kisses. 'That is how I used to sing for you people,' she said to her daughters beaming like a child who had just found a long, lost present.

She remembered the last child she had. The pain had been the most excruciating of all her deliveries. But after that, she had had this deep sense of peace and achievement and then much later, the pride of seeing her daughter grow. She tried to relive those moments but at that very instant realised she was not behaving rationally.

Minna lowered the child back on the bed, pulled the blanket over him and crossed her hands over her chest. Minna tried to think but the cells in her brains were proving to be very slow. She wiped her face with her hands and felt deeply stupid. 'A baby, so?' she said, walking away from the bed and frowning.

'We didn't have this baby before,' said Akwen watching her mother closely.

'You are trying to be clever like always, aren't you? Whose baby is this?'

'We don't know Mami,' Akwen said, throwing out her hands.

'I don't know or we don't know?' Minna's suspicion began to mount. At least her brains had picked up some fervour.

'Mami you are confusing us. The baby just came. That's what Akwen and Rogers said.' That was Rita again, twisting her small face.

Yes, her Rita was beginning to make more sense than her older sister, Minna thought. 'So between you and Rogers, who brought the baby? Rogers? Where's that boy? Rogers!'

Rogers came rushing in from the backyard where he had been doing laundry. He was dripping all over with lather. That did not matter for now. 'Whose child is this?' Minna shouted before subduing her voice to speak more responsibly. She felt she had spoken a bit out of turn. 'Sorry if I sounded too harsh. Just tell me the truth. I won't kill you. You are my son. Your father will also understand if you tell the truth. Where is this child from?'

Rogers' eyes flickered in alarm. He looked from his sisters to his mother. 'Haven't they told you?'

'Told me what, son?' said Minna.

'Akwen, you haven't told Mami what happened?'

'You tell me boy. I want to hear it from you. I won't hurt you. I'll understand.'

'Understand what?' Rogers yelled in incomprehension. 'Are you trying to suggest that I know where the child came from?'

He was not close enough to Minna's suspicion. She knew it was his. 'Do you?'

Rogers felt his throat constrict for an instance and he threw a fist in the air. 'What kind of question is this? Is this what you have been telling her?' Rogers shouted at her older sister thrusting an angry finger close to her face.

'No,' butted Akwen her hands raised in surrender and fear. 'We have been trying to explain to her but she wouldn't listen. Perhaps you can tell her better.'

'And why should I be the one to tell her? It was your idea, wasn't it? I refused but you insisted. Now I am the one who has done wrong?' Rogers still had brutal eyes on her sister.

'You are the one who heard the cry and opened the door. You called for me when I was already sleeping. You could explain it better.' Akwen eyed her brother back with equally hostile eyes.

Minna became even more confused following the altercation between her oldest children. Was there some kind of conspiracy between them and they were both playing to the gallery? 'What is going on between the two of you,' Minna broke in, still trying to figure out where all the exchange was heading. 'All I want to know is where this child is from.'

Akwen gave up. 'Okay, I'll say it. But Mami, don't get mad.'



'I promise,' Minna raise her hand like somebody taking a solemn oath before a judge.

'About thirty minutes after you people left, while we were reading, we heard this cry from outside. I was scared and I was already tired. I went to bed. Some minutes after, Rogers came into our room and told me it was the cry of a child and that the cry had not stopped. He persuaded me and I went after him back into the parlour.'

'And where were your sisters?' asked Minna looking solemn.

'They had long slept. In the parlour, I heard the cry again. At first it sounded like a cat and you know what they say about a cat crying in the night.'

'No I don't,' said Minna innocently.

'It's a bad sign. It may mean somebody is going to die or a very bad thing is about to occur.'

Minna was baffled. 'Where do you get this horror tale from? And you are children of God? Anyway, go on.'

'It wasn't a cat, Mami. It was the clear, distinct cry of a child. It was as if it was crying under that large window in the parlour. We were both scared. We thought of calling but you people had gone away with your phones. We put off the lights thinking the cry may stop. Some thieves can fake the cry of a child. That's what we later thought.'

'Rogers went into your room and got Pa's walking stick to fight if anyone dared to break in. We really imagined it could be thieves. We waited for the thieves to break in but only the cry kept coming. A cat wouldn't cry for that long. Rogers said he was going to go outside. I asked him not to but he wouldn't listen to me.'

'In darkness, he opened the door and slipped out. He also had Pa's small pocket torch in his bag, which he used and discovered that there was a baby on the veranda. I then switched on all the lights as Rogers asked - the parlour, the veranda and those at the gate. There was nobody outside, but for the baby on the veranda, wrapped in that wrappa that he is sleeping on.'

'Was the gate opened?' Minna knew the answer to that and sighed. She had begged Tetang but he just had to be stubborn.

'We didn't check,' replied Akwen. 'We were too scared.'

Minna could not remember how they got in after the clubbing. She had not been conscious about anything until Akwen had waken her up so rudely. If Akwen was telling the truth, it meant the gate stayed open throughout the night. 'Then you people carried the child in and locked up.'

'I refused, but Akwen insisted,' Rogers cut in. Both children seemed more interested in saving themselves from their mother's wrath.

Akwen ignored his intervention. 'Yes we did. The child was crying too much and was even shivering. He was cold and hungry. I scraped some bananas and gave him as well as some powdered milk that I dissolved in warm water. I put those old baby clothes on him and a short while after he slept. I had to sleep with him in the guest room. Mami I am sorry if we did anything wrong.'

'There is something I nearly forgot,' said Rogers. 'As we entered the house with the baby, we heard a noise as if someone was trying to shut the gate.'

Minna's brains were spinning at the speed of a tornado. She kept looking from her son to her daughter long after Rogers had finished his last sentence. She wanted to be sorry for Akwen and Rogers for their apparent humanitarian gesture but part of her did not believe they were all the innocence they portrayed. She did not want to believe she had been told the absolute truth.

Who in the world would abandon a naked baby on the doorstep of a stranger's house? But how was she going to accuse the children without being very sure about the facts? They were generally honest children. Accuse them falsely and she might lose their trust forever.

But the fact was, she had a strange child in her hands and she had only her children to tell her how the child found his way into her house. She sat at the edge of the bed carrying her head in her hands.

Minna looked from Rogers to Akwen then to Rita and wished her dear Rita could really tell her the truth like she always did. But all of them looked scared or was it a front to shield their guilt? Akwen and Rogers knew more than they were telling, Minna thought in spite of the mind she had to trust them as always. Could they have been reading deliberately late last night to wait for the child? From who? An accomplice?

A horrendous thought that had crept into her mind that the child could be Akwen's did not bind. As the mother living with the girl everyday, Minna would have noticed the pregnancy. But Minna had heard stories of how girls hid pregnancies even under the noses of their mothers only for these mothers to discover in shock that their daughters were in labour. Minna had witnessed a living example in Dorothy. Could Akwen have pulled such a fast one on her?

No way. Minna would have noticed some revealing body or behavioural changes. She had learnt her lesson from Dorothy. Her Akwen had for the past three years remained as tiny as a bamboo and as hard working as she had ever been. Akwen could not possibly have faked it for nine long months. And hid the baby to grow where? No, she just had to cancel Akwen out.

But not Rogers. He stood the better chance of knowing more about the origins of this child. Minna had never had any reason to think her boy could be wayward. But then, nobody could tell what was inside the heart of even a most beloved son. From the way he talked about girls and dressed up, he looked every inch like a boy having the eyes for girls.

Minna however had never seen her son with any particular girl to suspect he had a girlfriend. Or had her son turned out to be like those young men without a sense of discrimination? It did not sound like Rogers but extraordinary situations could make a woman think extraordinary things. Before the appearance of this child, Minna would have sworn anywhere that her son was a virgin. But now, she was not very sure.

Minna began to picture in her mind what could have happened. Rogers impregnates a girl, she refuses to have an abortion, Rogers dumps the girl, she secretly delivers the baby and when she can no longer cope, she dumps the baby in the father's house where she thinks the baby will have better care.

Minna wanted to talk out her theory but was afraid. She could not beef it up with facts. Her son might hate her forever if her accusations turned out to be false. She wanted to ask Rogers about her girlfriends but found it difficult to speak. Her Rogers was a child but big enough to keep some of his very private life private. Maybe his father could do it for her. Man-to-man talk. Time Tetang came in. 'You people wait here, I'm coming.'

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Tetang was snoring when Minna entered. Oh no. She was not going to bear this alone. He just had to get up. She shook him out of sleep. He pleaded to be left alone and complained of severe headache. But Minna was not going to have any of it. 'We have a special anniversary present.'

'Those children again?' Tetang jerked his face up.

'The last one was a joke. This one wins the prize.'

'What did they do?' said Tetang with rising excitement.

'Want me to spoil their game. Just come and see.'

Tetang jumped off the bed in one swift move. Then he grunted when his legs touched the floor. The impact was a bit hard. After wrapping a towel around his waist, he went after his wife.

He saw three sad looking faces in the guest room and a baby having the time of its life on the bed. 'So what are you up to?' He looked at Rogers and Akwen with great expectation.

Minna replied. 'The baby.'

'A baby for an anniversary gift? This is special. Thanks, and now I am going back to bed.'

'Not so fast,' entered Minna, taking hold of his hand. 'It's a real baby. See.' She went and pinched the baby and it flinched but slept back.'

'Did I say it wasn't? But I am sure I would have appreciated something better than a baby for a gift.' Tetang tried to close his eyes in indifference. 'Where's the baby from?'

'Good question. Do you have an answer?'

The bluntness with which Minna spoke seemed to jolt Tetang strongly. 'Is this a riddle or something?' His eyes grew more alert.

'Something and maybe you have the answer.' Minna cast suspicious eyes at her husband. For the first time in their marriage life, she had doubts about him. But she was not courageous enough to say it. Between the two men in her family, Tetang seemed the more likely candidate to father an illegitimate child. She knew of many women who had eyes for him but she could not tell whether he had ever taken advantage of one.

'I beg, can you tell me what is really going on?' pleaded Tetang.

'This baby just appeared in this house like that,' said Minna, snapping her fingers and her imagination taking her places. Could it be possible that one of the mad girls, tired of his long absences or negligence finally decided to hand him the child for him to do his own share of nursing? Or had they brought the child to him having discovered the real father was not capable of bringing up the child?

'Listen to your children.' Minna folded herself over her knees.

Akwen recounted the story again with concurrent statements from Rogers. Immediately, Tetang could hear the pulse of blood pumping down his veins. He moved away from the wall where he was leaning, paced to the window and back to the bed where the child was still sleeping in peace. He sent the children out and shut the door. Minna kept sitting on the bed while he leaned against the wall across.

'I have heard of mysterious occurrences but this one beats the rest. Somebody dumps a child on somebody's veranda at night? How did she get in?'

'She?' said Minna alarmed.

'Well, whoever.'

'No, you said she and I want to know why you said she and not he or they.'

Tetang lifted his body from the wall. He felt as if a stone was coming straight at his face. Then he cocked his face to one side as if gearing to cast his own stone. 'Why are you sounding like some investigating lawyer?'

Minna realised her question had been too hard though it had come spontaneously. But he was the one who had said it. Statements like he had made voluntarily did not just pop out from nowhere. 'Tee, I am sorry, but you can understand. This is all very strange and new to me.'

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Tetang wiped his face and sniffed. There were some tiny beads of sweat on his face. 'It is to all of us. That is why we need to keep cool heads and think properly and not start throwing accusations left and right that may end up causing even more damage.'

Minna bowed thoughtfully but she also knew that in such situations, it was very essential to have leads, which could be the basis for further examination. Thinking had to be based on some reasonable orientation. And he had given her one though she had to be careful the way she pursued it. She loved this man and would never dream of losing him. She however had to find a way of eliminating him from her targets of suspicion and his voice had not sounded convincing.

'What were you trying to say, Tee?' Minna said in a more affable tone.

'We didn't lock the gate yesterday and I regret that. Whoever entered must have taken advantage of that.'

Minna did not utter a word though she was boiling to blame him for his deliberate negligence. Why was he making the confessions anyway when she had not accused him? But she had to tread carefully. This man was her life. She simply shrugged her shoulders, though he was not looking.

'Let's think back to last night. Something happened as we were driving out. The woman we nearly knocked down.'

Minna's eyes flashed in recollection. 'Yes. She was carrying a baby. And the children said thirty minutes after we left. She is the one who brought the baby.'

Tetang rubbed a finger over his lips. 'It must be. Remember she just kept running away when we wanted to see if she had been injured. She must have recognised us and run away as a consequence. But the woman did go far away from the gate before we left. Think she came back when we had left?'

'That is very possible. But why dump her child with us and anyway, who might she be?'

Tetang pressed his hands between the wall and his buttocks. 'If only, it is a she. It could equally be a man. We could not identify the person, remember? We had concluded it was a woman just from cloth over her. A man could have been hiding behind all that cloth.'

'I am very certain it was a woman. I can picture the way she walked and ran. Definitely a woman's gait. It was a woman.' There was certainty in Minna's voice. 'But who could she be? said Minna. Was there any other woman in the world that could have been having a nice time with her husband?'

'A deranged girl, some desperate wife running away. Who knows? Maybe even a relative.'

Minna looked at her man with gaping eyes. 'Dorothy! Yes, Dorothy! It fits. She just had her baby. Let me look at the child.' Minna further unfolded the blanket and studied the face of the child again. She could not immediately see any resemblance but the age seemed to agree. She however was seeing sense in this conclusion.

'Dorothy had her child six to eight months ago and this child is about that old. 'It is Dorothy's baby,' added Minna rising with force from the bed. 'That woman was about Dorothy's height.'

'But she looked fatter.'

'We haven't seen Dorothy for years. It is just possible she could have put on weight. After all she just had a child. It's definitely Dorothy. I am very convinced. Stole her way here in the night, dumps her own baby on her jackass and scrams away to freedom. Freedom to sample all the men on the face of this earth. And I do her dirty work. No way. This is the height of it and I am going to deal with her.'

'Calm down Minna,' said Tetang very responsibly. 'We have to be very sure before reaching any conclusion. We should investigate first and get the facts. We shouldn't just jump into conclusions like that. It may explode in our faces and leave us even more wounded. The child may be Dorothy's or may be not. Why don't we even try and call your mother to find out.'

'Call my mother? Why?'

'But I had the impression Dorothy had gone to meet her with the baby. And you confirmed it.'

'Me?' Minna slapped her chest. 'I never did. If at all I told you anything, then it must have been in anger. Dorothy is not with Ma.'

'Where is she or where did she have the baby?'

Minna shook her head. 'Kumba, Douala, Yaounde, I don't know where exactly. All I know is that she has been moving between these towns. That is according to Ma anyway. Dorothy does not care to phone.'

'Then phone Ma and find out.'

'What for,' said Minna with scorn. 'What phone even? The phones I sent to Ma and Pa have all been stolen. Two sets of phones each. And guess who the thief is? Dorothy.'

'Aha Minna. You can't be sure.'

‘Of course she is the thief. Everything I buy for Ma that Dorothy likes, Dorothy takes. And instead of using the phones for the benefit of the family, she sells them to buy the love of men. Or she sells them to pay transportation to another town where she can start a new cycle of hooking to another conman who ends up brutalising her or getting her pregnant and running away.’

‘Then call some other relative.’ Tetang was not sure how he felt. Whatever the feeling was, it carried fear and irritation. His heavenly sleep had so bluntly been interrupted and his whole family was being plunged into an unexpected crisis. Minna was making the situation worse with her insinuations and suspicions.

‘If only the relatives are where there is network. It’s only by chance that you can reach somebody by phone in Widikum. A very slim chance. But Tee, I don’t need to find out to know all this is Dorothy’s work. Ever since she had the child, she’s been urging Ma to blackmail me into taking her child and Ma has not stopped hounding me. Is it not scandalous to think that a woman would give birth to a child and wants but another woman to bring up the child? This is the height of lunacy, Tee?’

‘See Min,’ said Tetang, not too confidently. ‘I still think you are being too hasty in judgement. There may be a much simpler explanation to all these than we know. Let us investigate other angles first before drawing any conclusion. Why don’t we start even with our neighbours and the quarter? We may uncover useful information.’

Minna agreed more out of respect for her husband than the wisdom of his suggestion. Deep in her mind, she believed he agreed with her position but was just trying to mollify the situation. Investigation would yield nothing. She knew what her sister and her mother were capable of and could predict their actions better. But she just had to succumb to the only person in the world who loved her unconditionally. She however had up to Tuesday free and could as well use the time to nose around for any useful information.

But why did Tetang look a bit nervous?

**T**hough acting with reluctance, Minna nevertheless went after her husband as they went round the quarter and even beyond to get any useful information. But nobody saw any strange woman with a baby Friday night, nobody saw any strange movement in their yard, nobody saw Dorothy and nobody knew of any missing child.

They drove to the radio stations in town to find out if there were any notices concerning a missing child. They got one concerning a child who had been stolen from the maternity. They rushed to the maternity only to be told that there had been a mix up. The baby's grandmother had taken him away without informing the mother who had left the child on her bed to go and get her hospital discharge papers.

Tetang suggested that they send a notice over a radio station. But Minna was reluctant to do that for two reasons. An impostor might appear and make convincing claims about the child only for the right parent to come later and be told that someone else had the child.

Secondly, Minna was scared her mother would kill her for making a public announcement about her own nephew, if as Minna had concluded, the child actually was Dorothy's. Ma would never forgive her. Tetang did not agree but kept quiet. He did not want his wife to become more miserable. That was why they just had to keep the child and keep trying to find out discretely where he came from.

Minna however maintained her conviction: that the child was Dorothy's. And her position was not going to change until somebody could present evidence to the contrary. She could not think of any other person capable of hatching such a scheme besides Dorothy. A very ungrateful sister.

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Minna did not have classes on Mondays and Tuesdays. It was therefore normal for her to stay behind while everybody went away. She actually stood on the veranda and waved as usual, as Tetang pulled the car out of the yard with the children comfortably seated in their bright uniforms. She felt the tingling sensations of pride and triumph.

She had achieved. A wonderful husband, bright children, all happy and strong. Hard work and diligence she had invested was paying off. She no longer needed to strain to get things moving. Everyone in her small family was responsible and had come to accept that destiny was not an endowment but made. And Minna could see each of them striving to succeed in every endeavour.

This was the very kind of attitude Minna had all along wanted to implant in her sister. She had indeed thought her sister had it. But that was in the early days when they were still living under their parent's roof. And Dorothy had been a skilful chameleon.

Minna could hardly believe her sister was going to orchestrate another scheme until it blew in her face with full force. Minna could have sworn before any judge that her sister was a changed woman and for good. The way Dorothy carried on only reminded Minna of the holy virgin in the bible. Dorothy actually brought bible reading in the house and regular morning prayers. The way she preached would have convinced even the devil to change his ways.

Minna had wanted her sister to go back to school for she still saw the intellect in her sister. Dimo, Minna's brother-in-law who had come to live with them and complete the sixth forms, also tried to convince Dorothy about the merits of a proper education. But Dorothy was dead set against it. She instead begged her sister to allow her get some training as a nursing assistant.

That was better than not doing anything at all. Minna thus did as Dorothy wished. Minna got her sister enrolled in the nursing school. Training was supposed to run for three years but nobody knew Dorothy did not intend to stay the course.

Not up to a year in the course, Minna started noticing a strange attitude. Not only did Dorothy start coming home late but she also developed a weird taste in clothes. She started appearing in short and tight outfits and when Minna tried to ask for an explanation, all Dorothy would say is “it’s fashion”.

What worried Minna most was not even the sleazy styles but the source of the clothes, which were by no measure, cheap. She was the one who gave money to Dorothy and knew Dorothy could not afford the clothes with new ones appearing almost on a daily basis. When asked where the money came from, Dorothy had a ready answer. The rounds they did in hospitals and little help they gave pregnant women often earned them tips that could sometimes be heavy. And Minna also had to understand that in an almost exclusively female environment like the nursing school, there was bound to be some competition in clothes.

Minna was not entirely convinced and she wanted to probe further but feared making her sister feel she did not trust her. The first hint Minna got about Dorothy’s new enterprise was a convoluted remark from Dimo. One evening when Dorothy had got the whole family around for prayers, Dimo made a very peculiar statement: “It liveth even if the eyes see-est not.”

Very Shakespearean Minna had thought, thinking her brother-in-law was getting carried away by his studies. It would have ended at that had Minna not noticed the hostile eyes Dimo had cast on Dorothy and abandoning the prayers without taking any excuse.

Minna had wanted to ask her sister what was going on but she could not muster the courage. She however resolved to put a critical eye after her sister and Dimo. Minna was going to put up a stiff fight if Dimo dared to corner Dorothy. Minna did eventually not find any dead rat but however remained on edge for the hostility between Dorothy and Dimo grew even worse. It got to the point where they hardly spoke to each other. Fight between in-laws from the opposite sides could be very messy.

To avoid the mess, Minna decided it was better to separate the two young people. She got a room for her sister that was even closer to the nursing school. Her sister should concentrate on her training and not become subject to some high-pressured temptation or waste her energy fighting with an in-law. Minna however did not realise she was giving a blank cheque to her sister until she got an incredible tale from Tetang.

Tetang was sharing a quiet drink with a friend in a dark bar when two flimsily clad women came and sat by them just like that. No invitation. The woman who sat closer to Tetang took off her fashionable glasses and in a drunken voice asked Tetang for a drink.

When Tetang turned and looked at the woman closer, there was no mistake in his mind. He jumped out of his chair, yanked Dorothy to her feet and shook her as if he wanted her head to fall off. Then he remembered he was in public and released the girl. He sighed, bade good night to his friend and left.

At first, Minna laughed when Tetang told her. No, her Dorothy had become such a good Christian that what Tetang had narrated was aimed at nothing but sullyng a good image. Early the following morning, Minna went straight to Dorothy’s room with the intention to warn Dorothy that Tetang and his family were out to destroy her revived reputation.

A half-naked man with a belly that looked like it could burst at the slightest touch opened the door. The man could easily be Dorothy’s father. Minna had hardly got over the shock when Dorothy with her own nakedness in full flourish waddled to the door and greeted her sister casually with her eyes half-closed. There was not an iota of shame or fear on Dorothy’s face. Dorothy instead walked back into the room and covered herself with a wrappa, taking all the time in the world. Minna now understood why her brother-in-law had invoked shakespearean philosophy.

The man walked past Minna, carrying this broad smile on his face as if he had just received the best news in his life. Minna remained stuck by the door, gaping and trying to pull herself together. Alcohol reeking air blew on her face like the precursor of a spiritual



attack. Minna took some steps backward and would have run away had she not reminded herself she was indeed in front of Dorothy's room. Her beloved sister's room.

Blinded by sudden rage, Minna jumped into the room and flung a fist at Dorothy's face. Dorothy caught the fist in the air with such power that Minna almost collapsed in disbelief. And that was not all. Dorothy had this defiant look on her face that Minna knew she had no chance of coming out alive if she tried to go physical again. That face was warning enough. Quietly, head bowed, Minna walked out, not uttering any other word.

'Sister, it's my life.' That was what Dorothy had said and there could not be any more categorical statement. Her sister was indeed an adult, at least legally, and could take care of herself.

The next time Minna saw Dorothy, was some three months later when she had finally abandoned the training and was parading about with a swollen belly. Ma was the one who brought Dorothy with the very potbelly man to announce to Minna that Dorothy was getting married and this one was for real. As evidence of that, Ma gave all the details of the very fat bride price that had been paid.

Tetang's own bride price was not a fraction close to what the man, a second hand car dealer had offered. Ma made sure that the comparison was made. Ma even boasted of the money that the man had left for her farms to be ploughed and looked after. She spoke glowingly of how the man even gave Pa an expensive watch that Ma explained was close to the cost of a second hand car.

As another irrefutable evidence of the man's wealth and generosity, the man kept them in a three star hotel for close to a week. Ma's room had television and her own private toilet. They had most of their meals at the hotel where a plate could feed an ordinary family for a week. Ma had never known such luxury before.

Dorothy did not even apologise nor did Ma ask her to. All they had come for was to brag and show how Dorothy cared for the family so much that she chose only the kind of man that could be of real material benefit to the family. Not the types like Tetang who often had to think very hard before offering even just a chicken to an in-law. Dorothy's man knew how to treat his in-laws and that was why he did invite Ma to live with them and to return only after Dorothy had given birth.

Ma had never spent as much as a week in Minna's house. Not at the birth of any of Minna's children and Minna had wanted her Ma to be by her desperately. Ma had given the excuse that she had to stay back in the village to safeguard her own share of the family's property. Here was the very Ma going out for probably more than a year and really relishing the prospects.

And Minna knew what was going to happen. Ma was going to be the cook, the house cleaner, the laundry girl, and eventually the babysitter. Lady Dorothy would just be slouching from one couch to the other, polishing her nails and whingeing on and on how pregnancy had distorted her figure and made her tired. Minna just knew that Ma was going to be happy slaving for Dorothy with her reward being flattering gifts from her son-in-law.

Whatever happened to real love, Minna remembered thinking when the big luxurious box owned by Dorothy's man rolled out of the Fru's compound carrying away Ma, heavy Dorothy and her man to some coastal paradise – Limbe.

That was the last time Minna saw Dorothy in person. That was over five years ago. She of course heard all the good news of Dorothy's year-long cohabitation with the man. Ma made sure of that. Writing often and phoning when she had the opportunity. Ma spoke of the man's gob-smacking wealth, his chain of businesses, his highly placed friends, the banquets upon banquets the man was fond of throwing and the constant excursions they had to make to places like the beach, high-class restaurants, cinemas and other elitist delights. Of course, Ma could not forget the fortune he spent on the preparation of the coming of the baby.

Minna was happy for her sister even if grudgingly. Off course she knew Dorothy did not wish her well. Minna was consequently not going to sing and dance for Dorothy's



apparent success. Minna could also not help feeling rotten that she could not make her family and especially her mother as happy as Dorothy could. Minna always had to fight very hard before she could get just a nice word from Ma. But not Dorothy.

Everything Dorothy touched was gold in Ma's eyes. And now that Dorothy had found not just a piece of gold but a whole gold mine, Dorothy was going to grab even that last piece that Ma sometimes did reserve for Minna. Minna had always known that Dorothy had the propensity to turn Ma around her fingers. It was therefore no surprise to Minna that everything in connection with Dorothy's matrimony got only top marks.

That was why when the phone calls and letters stopped coming, Minna only thought the wonder man had spoilt her Ma and sister so badly that they no longer had the space and time for people who were stuck far down the social ladder. But like all truths under the sun, this one was finally unveiled.

The letters started coming again but this time from Minna's aunt who had run away from the compound of her dead husband to join her older sister who was back in Widikum. Her aunt revealed how Ma had run away for good and with tears in her eyes from Limbe. The story was that Dorothy got to discover that in contrast to what her dear man had solemnly promised, he had a wife whom he had left in the village. The woman apparently came visiting one day without sending any notice.

Fire and brimstones fell when both women got to discover they were opposing arms of the same body. The fight was so fierce that Ma, in trying to pacify the parties got a black eye in the process. When the man returned home to discover what had happened, he fell on Ma and Dorothy whom he accused of acting without getting the clear from him. He called Ma names and even asked her to take her daughter away. Ma had to borrow money to leave Limbe and eventually stealing her way to Widikum.

Minna knew Ma was too ashamed to stop by before fleeing to Widikum. 'Serves them right,' Minna had said to herself. Ma's running away was just the entrée. The man later on got Dorothy so well flogged that Dorothy had a miscarriage. The miscarriage was the end of the man's interest in Dorothy.

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Three months after the flogging, Dorothy packed out of the man's house and fled to Douala. Dorothy according to Auntie Aggie, resorted to living between Douala and Widikum. When things got rough in Douala, she would run to her mother in Widikum only to rush back to Douala once she had managed to squeeze money from Ma's bag or from the poor men in Widikum.

Minna did make trips to Widikum to find out for herself what was happening. She was however never lucky to meet her sister. It was as if Dorothy always sensed when she was coming and taking flight out of the village before Minna's arrival.

During these visits, not once did Ma attempt to give just the impression that she was appalled by the way things had turned out. Ma would not utter any word of regret about Dorothy's behaviour. Not even about Dorothy's promiscuity, which was on every lip in Widikum? Ma instead gave Dorothy a new redeeming name – the struggling woman.

Ma would not have Minna say anything negative about Dorothy. Ma told Minna that if she really did care about her younger sister, she should help her by sending her money. Money to start a business, money to go to Cotonou and buy cloth to sell like a woman of calibre.

Over her dead body, was Minna's defiant declaration to Ma. She told Ma point blank that for her to help Dorothy, Dorothy had to come to her on bent knees and apologise for all the shame and agony she had caused and make a written promise to mend her ways. Helplessly outraged, by the conditions, Ma called Minna all kinds of names with selfishness and malice not being the least of them. And every time Minna turned down any of Ma's request of help for Dorothy, Ma made sure Minna was reminded of how selfish she and her husband were.

It never bothered Ma that Minna and her husband did not spare money and energy to make a woman of Dorothy. Ma instead spent her time sermonising on the lies Dorothy had fed her with. Tall stories on how Dorothy was poorly treated when they were all living together. Dorothy had talked of how all the house chores were left in her hands. How she was forced to take care of all the children, cook all the meals, do all the laundry and was still expected to do well in class.

Dorothy lied how it was a man whom Tetang brought home that took advantage of her naivety and tricked her to quit school for the first time. Dorothy got Ma into believing that frustration caused by constant insults from every member of the Fru's family was what finally pushed her into the hands of the wealthy man.

Minna fought with her last energy to dispel the lies but they had become such permanent fixtures in Ma's mind that they were what Ma used as the barometer for measuring people's love for her. That was why in Minna's estimation she and husband were far down the list of Ma's favourite persons.

It always pained Minna to think that her Ma did not like her. It was difficult for her to accept that she was no longer her Ma's favourite as it used to be when she was still a girl. Dorothy was the cursed angel that had been sent to do the damage. Destroy the once big heart of Ma. Transform Ma from a tolerant, accommodating mother to a prejudiced, scary juju. It did not bother Dorothy that Ma was already under the strain of adapting to the new polygamous set up. Dorothy just exploited that to get their Ma exclusively to her side.

'You are the selfish one,' Minna shouted, rising from the couch on which she had lay. 'And you want me to take care of your child? Over my dead body! You will take him back I promise you. You alone will lie on the bed that you made. Bitch!' Minna held her mouth as the word came out.

Then as if the child had heard, out gushed a cry that was sharper than the noise Minna had heard from any of those plaining machines she had seen in the technical school where she taught. The cry pierced very hard into Minna's heart, to the point that it yanked her out of her thoughts and into the vivid realities.

She skipped off the couch only to discover she had not even locked the door. As she went to lock it, she also realised the gate was wide open. She was about to step on the veranda when the cry of the child blunted her focus. She ran into the room where the child was swimming in his wastes and apparently was furious as a consequence.

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Everyone was indeed fond of the child in the beginning. All hands were itching to carry him immediately he made the slightest noise. Everyone was prepared to surrender their meal for him to have enough. It went to the extent that Akwen who had started behaving like a surrogate mother to the child almost shed tears when the child had to be pulled away from her in order that she could go to school. Minna too was in for the fondness despite her anger with Dorothy. She did not have to extend the anger to the innocent child who never asked to be born in the first place. That was her spirit until the Monday when everyone had to leave her alone with the child.

The cry that had got Minna scuttling away from the parlour was just a warm up in the child's repertoire of obnoxious habits. The cry went on and on long after Minna had removed the wet things and pressed him against her chest. It was a long time that she last cuddled a baby but everyone knew that the naughtiest of babies always found solace on Minna's chest. Not this one however. The cry was accompanied by kicking and spitting like some grotesque dramatic moves. The child squeezed his eyes closed and rattled his head as if telling Minna she was wasting her time.

Minna sang, paced up and down with the child and promised him all she could think every child liked. But the child kept tearing out his lungs as if he was born to do just that. As the child did not come with any clothes, Minna just had to wrap him in her last daughter's old baby clothes. That did not help matters.

Minna ran with him into the kitchen and made a cup of milk for him. After just a sip, the child spewed everything out and even vomited. That was it. Minna dropped him on the couch to mourn over her white night dress that was dripping over in disgorged food. She ran to her room moaning and cursing.

When she came back in fresh clothes, the cry had reduced to sobs which shook the child as if he was about to die. The child was definitely hungry. He had not eaten and what he had the previous night was light. Minna left the child sobbing to prepare corn pap in which she added soya milk and carrot juice. A very rich meal for a child and Minna thought he was going to eat with gusto. Tough luck!

The child would not open his mouth. After seconds of futile pleas, Minna forced the spoon through the little lips but the child spat out everything. Minna had the same reactions after several attempts and decided she was not going to be defeated. She slapped a finger hard on the child's soft jaw. This forced the child to open the mouth not to receive the food but to engage in another bout of deafening shrills.

'No doubt your mother dumped you,' blasted Minna as she locked the child firmly to her side. With her free hand, she forced spoonful after spoonful in the child's mouth, blowing air each time over the child's face to force him to swallow. That was how Minna succeeded in getting food down the little stomach.

Tuesday, Minna had the same unnerving sessions with the child and this only went to strengthen her resolve to see the child out of her home and back to his mother. She had seen enough with her own four children and was not going to subject herself to a child rejected by his own mother. In the meantime, she had a deeper practical problem in front of her. She had classes from Wednesdays to Fridays. What therefore was going to happen to the child? She posed the question when the whole family was at table, Tuesday evening.

She was greeted by silent stares. That did not surprise her. She knew all along that everyone had just assumed it was her duty to look after the child. No one had bothered to find out what her own feelings were. What however did surprise her was the confident response that came some minutes later from Akwen.

'I can stay and look after the child.'

Minna did not know whether to be shocked or angry, or just being thankful to God for giving her a daughter with a heart of gold. Her Akwen had a good heart all right and would one day make a wonderful mother to some children. But until then, that good heart had to be reserved for growing up and getting a good education. Cutting school and her lessons for the sake of an abandoned baby was way off the line.

'Shut up Akwen,' said Minna curtly. 'You are not going to do any such thing.'

'Think I can't take care of a child on my own?'

'You can do that once you are out of my hands. Until then, you have your A levels to pass for me.' Minna could not be blunter than that.

'Then why don't we get a babysitter?'

Her husband was always practical, thought Minna though with a cynical slant. In a different situation, it would work but not this. 'I had made a promise when I sent away the last babysitter that she would be the last. There's no longer any child of mine who needs babysitting. And this baby is going to be here only briefly. I don't have the time to train a new girl to live according to the rules of this house. No, I'm not going to do that. Besides, bringing in new people in one's house these days is a very complicated affair.'

'But there are some good girls out there,' said Tetang in all earnesty. 'All you need to do is ask some good people. I could ask. I even have some children in my village who may like to come, spend some time in town, and go back once the baby has gone. Even if you need them tomorrow, they would be here. If you don't like that, ask your friend Sister Samba. She can be very reliable.'

'Getting someone to babysit is not the big problem. The problem is getting her to adjust to my taste. And also, it would mean keeping this baby here for longer than I am prepared to take.'

‘Chei Mami,’ entered Akwen. ‘You are being too superior.’

‘I accept the insult and stand by it. I am the one who runs this home and know what it needs more than anybody.’

‘Is that true Pa,’ said Tiffuh who had been trying to enjoy her plate of jollof rice untroubled. At eight, the last child of the home was a super-active girl. She was supposed to be a boy, her parents used to say because she loved doing only what boys did – playing football, climbing trees and wrestling with other children. But Minna wanted her daughters to be girls and was consequently always battling with Tiffuh about cooking and keeping her undergarments clean. When Minna was not there, Akwen was there as the substitute enforcer.

‘To a certain extent,’ said Tetang demurely.

‘But you can beat Mami now?’ There was no question that Tiffuh loved her father more than her mother. He often let her do the things she liked while Mami was always sending her to the kitchen.

‘It’s not about power Tiffuh but about division of labour as you learnt in school the last time.’ Tetang had to be diplomatic this time. The look he got from Minna was enough warning.

‘Keep quiet Tiffuh, when your father and I are talking,’ Minna cut in impatiently. She could tell that nobody was feeling as uncomfortable as her. ‘Well since nobody wants to give us a better solution, I am going to take two weeks permission from my principal and look after the child. If within the two weeks nobody comes up for the child, then he goes to an orphanage.’

Tetang was not comfortable with the suggestion, which was pronounced with such finality. Minna was supposed to discuss with him first and not thinking aloud in the presence of the children. Not on such a delicate issue.

‘I don’t think so. Not if the child turns out to be Dorothy’s.’ Tetang stopped abruptly regretting his harsh voice. No hot argument in the presence of the children. And he sensed the argument could become very combative if it continued. Minna was in a volatile mood and it needed just a bit of provocation to spark her off. He was the one with the cooler head and had to use it now. He closed the discussions by picking up the child who was spluttering away on the couch.

But Minna just had to talk out. She had never been faced with such a crisis before. Even if she had to stay behind to take care of the child, she was not sure she still had it in her to pamper a child. And especially a child that was not hers and was such a nuisance. She waited when only she and Tetang were in their room, to pour out her frustration on him.

‘Tee I am sorry if I appear to be losing my mind. Just be patient and help me. You know how fragile my relationship with my family is. I am looking for a way of handling this thing so that if really this child is Dorothy’s, it shouldn’t worsen the relationship, especially that with my mother. I can manage it the way it is but if it gets worse, I am going to blame myself forever.’

‘I understand you very well, my dear and I am going to be patient. Besides, you are not in this alone. We all are. I am worried sick also but we have to calm down and take one step at a time. And also, do remember that sometimes things have to get bad before they can get better. I am not saying that things will get bad, but you just have to prepare your mind for that. If you have chosen to stay at home, that’s fine as long as you are comfortable with it. I’ve thought about what you wanted to say about the orphanage. I think it is a practical solution. But if the child is Dorothy’s, then we have to keep him or take him to your mother.’

Minna lapsed into silence. She wasn’t exactly sure what her husband was referring to about things getting bad. What exactly was going to get bad? Did he know more than he was letting out? If only Minna could read what was simmering behind his half-closed eyes. He sounded as if there were some heated battle going on in his mind and one side was yet

to win. She felt like confronting him straight on but how was she going to do it without having any meat to chew on.

For now, Tetang was the only rock of ages cleft for her and how badly she needed him. No, she had to clear the doubts in her head. She was probably going hysterical. She had to chill. The issue was Dorothy, her mother and the naughty child. That was the angle she should concentrate on.

Minna would have loved nothing more than punishing her Ma with Dorothy's baby. But she still loved her and knew Ma was not all the steel and concrete impression she gave of herself. Her mother for all the strong noises she made was not a very strong woman. She had been diagnosed with hypertension and was not in a state to handle a baby. Unless of course Dorothy was going to be there which Minna doubted very much. Sending the child to her Ma was therefore not such a very convenient idea.

As for the idea of keeping the child as Tetang had suggested, Minna was not going to discuss it. She was not going to keep the child for any major length of time in her house. Two weeks was the most she could tolerate. She had done her own bit by raising four healthy children and it had not been a child's play.

Minna had a recurring pain in her neck that resulted from constant bending in caring for her children. She was not about to have the pain worsened. She was a free woman ever since her Tiffuh began to feed herself. And that freedom she cherished so much that she was not prepared to allow even a poor abandoned baby interfere with it.

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Akwen insisted and got the child to sleep on her bed instead of an old cot that Minna had set up in her own room. It was Akwen's own way of relieving her mother of the burden. But after three nights, Akwen could no longer cope. The child cried throughout the night and would stop only when Akwen strapped him on her back and walked about with him. He would go to sleep but immediately Akwen tried to place him on the bed, the crying would resume.

The fourth night, the situation even grew worse for the crying went on even when Akwen put him on her back. In the middle of the night, Akwen just had to wake up her mother to complain.

Serves her right. That was Minna's immediate cynical reaction. Minna had warned Akwen about sleeping with the child but Akwen was mother superior who had the magic wand to handle even the naughtiest of children. 'Breast-feed her,' said Minna cynically. 'You are his mother.'

Minna still went after her daughter and discovered that the child had a temperature. She removed the warm clothing over him and gave him some syrupy drug. But the child was agitated and began to cry. The child did not cry, he screamed. He tore the air with some sharp flawless whine that anyone would have thought a mighty swine was battling for its life against the onslaught of a butcher's knife. It jarred the ears like an old sawing machine working on very dry wood. Everyone was pulled out of their beds, even Rogers who was the king of sleep in the house.

They all converged in Akwen's room only to watch an unloved baby giving the performance of his life. Nothing could be done to stop him from screaming. He was passed from hand to hand as everyone pulled off their best gimmicks at shutting up a baby. They rocked him in all directions, tickled his tummy, sang the sweetest songs and talked all the baby grammar in the world. The little one was dead set against comfort.

Thoughtful Akwen thought she had the perfect solution. She went into the kitchen and a short while after, appeared with a full bottle of warm milk. After just the first draw, the boy spat everything out and pumped up his voice further as if he had been given poison.

'Beat him,' was Tiffuh's intelligent solution.

Minna would have done that if she did not have everyone crowding around her. They would think she was Satan incarnate. Especially Akwen. 'If that works for you, it doesn't work for babies.' Minna was picking on the wrong person and her own benjamin of all persons. 'Go back to bed,' she ordered her children and went into the parlour with the baby.

Much to her disgust, she strapped the child on her back and began to sing some of those lullabies she last sang for Tiffuh. Her voice was bad and she had forgotten most of the words. She sang nevertheless, moving from the parlour to the kitchen and hatred for her sister rising in ever-greater intensity.

The crying gradually began to subside but Minna knew it was not the consequence of true remorse. The performer was getting tired. It wasn't a genuine appreciation of her maternal exertions. Minna unstrapped the baby and sat at the foot of a couch where Tetang had lay watching her covering miles round the house in a race of seducing an ungrateful baby. 'How long is this going to take?' he said, weak eyes closing in on his poor wife.

Minna just sighed as she placed the baby across her laps. The baby began to breathe like he was having some chronic respiratory attack. Inhale, hold for a very long time before exhaling. In a different situation, Minna would have been concerned. But she just sat back with indifference. Not an ounce of sympathy would have seeped out of her if the child were to die. She was full to the brim. She decided to distract herself with some shot of cynicism. 'I thought you once mentioned we could keep him.'

'I have changed my mind. Send him away even if he is your nephew.'

Minna did not say anything further. Tetang was finally on her wavelength. But if the child had to be sent away, it had to be done in a manner that would cause the least pain. She was not sure about sending the child to Ma. Ma's health was not the best. If she knew where her sister was, she would have driven there herself and dumped the baby with her. But nobody knew where Dorothy's permanent base was. Not even Ma. All Minna knew was that Dorothy lived between Widikum and Douala.

Ma was the best option. Sending the child to an orphanage for adoption would send Ma hanging herself on a tree. Minna could not afford to be the cause of her own mother's death. So to Ma the child had to go. This option however was still fraught with dangers. The child and its bad behaviour might cause Ma to strain even more and perhaps to the extent of worsening her already fragile condition. That would not sit properly in Minna's conscience.

But what other choice did she have? Perhaps Ma could even hand over the child to Dorothy if and when she showed up.

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The days that ensued made the idea of sending the baby away even more urgent. Besides the relentless crying, which he indulged in in sickening frequency, he had other revolting mannerisms, which even Rita of all persons could not bear. Rita gave a rare curse when the baby vomited a full bottle of ovaltine on her brand new dress in the morning, as she was getting ready for church. Rita was so angry that she refused to go to church and stayed behind with her mother and the naughty baby.

Feeding the child remained a fierce game of war. Only on the first two days had he been cooperative; eating peacefully and not making any fuss about even ordinary mashed food. Minna was a sucker for balanced diets and insisted that the child be fed with ordinary local foods like she fed her children. The good effects of this policy could be seen in the healthy children she had. But imposing her choices on the child turned out to be a very bad idea.

Before a drop could get into the child's system, he would spit, vomit, kick, twist and scream. Minna's solution was slap, block the child's nostrils to get him to swallow, curse

him with the foulest words, wish death on his mother and at the end of every exercise she would be inundated all over with squelchy food and exhausted to her arteries. She would have no other choice but to go to bed and forget that food had not been prepared for the house.

Minna resorted totally to formula milk for the child and for the child to be satisfied, she had to fix for him at least two bottle feeds every time. And a couple of hours after, he would be screaming for attention and more milk. Even late at night, Minna often had to get up to give him his bottle. They were buying a tin of milk every three days and that did cost quite a fortune. At his age, the child was supposed to be eating solid food.

The effects of the total milk diet did show one morning when the whole family was waken up again by one of those unending screams. A bottle was fixed but the baby would not have it. He would pull away his mouth immediately the bottle was stuck in it just to have the freedom to cry.

Amidst the crying were the hiccups, twitching and fighting to fold himself over his stomach. The child had not passed out stool for three days and Minna suspected the baby was suffering from some stomach malaise. 4 a.m. when the world was still dark, Tetang had to drive Minna with the child to the hospital.

Minna fell in another embarrassment when the nurse asked for the baby's name. Minna remained tight-lipped and cast eyes at her husband seeking for inspiration. Tetang was even in a worse state than she was. He was still fuming in rage for having had his night rest interrupted with cruelty. He just turned his face away in apathy. The child was not his. The child belonged to Minna's sister and consequently, it was entirely Minna's problem.

'Ngam.' The name came out of Minna's throat with little effort and that was a surprise. Where the inspiration came from she could not tell but it sounded so right. Ngam was her grandfather's name though Minna had not been very fond of him. Maybe the spirit of her grandfather had visited her to tell her the child was his re-incarnation. This thought only went to confirm for her that the child was of her bloodline. So Ngam it had to be.

The very thin nurse looked at her with suspicion. 'Why do you sound as if you are not sure about the name of your own child?'

'I am sure,' said Minna nervously, not wishing to open pages of her private affairs to this meddlesome nurse.

'Ngam who?' said the nurse again, this time frowning.

This time, there was no hesitation from Minna. 'Fru.'

Tetang was the one who turned in shock at his wife's temerity. Not Fru, he wanted to say but forced himself to stay calm, realising this was not a battle to be fought in front of an innocent nurse. But he made sure he demonstrated his objection by walking out of the consultation room. Ngam or whoever was no child of his. Minna had some explaining to do.

When Minna described the symptoms and the eating habits of the child to the cheeky nurse, she laughed; laughed at Minna. How could she a mother of several children not realise that the child had nothing more complicated than constipation and with remedies that every ordinary nursing mother should have. Gripe water. That was all the nurse prescribed. She did not know that Minna was once again a novice at postnatal care and Minna was not prepared to tell her.

Minna bought the gripe water at the hospital pharmacy and joined her husband for a tense drive back home. They did not speak to each other but stared ahead with stony faces and contemplating quietly on their frustrations and anger.

At home, the children were already busy with house chores. Akwen and Rita were in the kitchen, Rogers was mopping the floor and Tiffuh was doing the plates. Minna thanked God for their dedication and understanding. Normally, she would be the one championing the cooking in order to ensure the breakfast was good and balanced. Akwen was good but still had a lot to learn.



Minna did not even have the time to watch as her husband and children gathered around the table for their breakfast. She was busy changing Ngam's clothes. The overbearing Ngam. She heard loud bitter protest and decided to leave the baby for a while and find out what the matter was. Rogers was grumbling and Akwen was shouting at Rita. Tetang was actually leaving the table as she appeared and had not touched even a grain of the rice he had filled in a plate.

'Mami just come and taste this food,' complained Rogers before Minna could even catch her breath. 'This is poison.'

Minna rushed forward and tasted the food. She spat out at the first taste. 'Sugar in rice? And the rice is not done. What happened, Akwen?'

'Rita mixed the local Ndop rice and the imported rice though I had warned her.'

'Rita you know the imported one takes much longer to get done,' said Minna, trying to calm herself. 'And why did you put but sugar and not salt.'

'Simple Mami,' sprang Tiffuh. 'She didn't pray well this morning and mistook the sugar cup for the salt cup. What are we going to eat now?'

'Shut up,' Rita fired back.

'And I have a serious test this morning,' went Rogers gathering his books.

'Okay,' begged Minna raising her hands in desperation. 'Your father will give everyone money to buy something in school.' And she had not even sought her husband's opinion.

Tetang eyed his wife with some resentment. How dare she order him around like that. 'They now have to be eating breakfast in dirty eating-houses. Maybe it's time you started giving priority to your own children.' Tetang rushed out in a flash not wishing to hear any response.

But Minna was full of it too. 'And what priority have you given them. Can't you cook for them yourself?' She did not follow him but sat on one of the dining chairs and carried her head in her hands. A pumping station was roaring live right in the centre of her brains. She did not hear the car drive off with the children but became conscious she was in a jam when the tedious voice of Ngam blared from her room.

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After feeding Ngam, she jumped straight into the kitchen to cobble up a tasty meal for the family. She was definitely going to have another war in the house should the children come back and find out they still had only their half-cooked, sugared rice for lunch. She was going to prepare a family special. Garri and okro soup with chunky pieces of meat. It was quite a practical choice for it was good and quick to prepare.

There went the bell as she chopped the meat. Minna went and opened the gate, surprised to find Lisha. This time she looked resplendent and responsible in a purple suit. Lisha did not have time to go in but had rushed here just to drop a letter she had got from the gateman at school.

Minna decided she was not going to read the letter until she was done with the cooking. She feared it was another blaster from Ma and that would make her not to give in her best on the pot.

When she was through with the cooking, she served herself quite a plateful, then went and lay on the couch before opening the letter. It was even worse than what she expected.

*My darling Tee,*

*I can see you liked the package I sent you two Fridays ago. I can also see you are getting along fine and your nice family too. Isn't it a good harvest from the nice seed you planted in me? I did you good, didn't I? You can be proud you have two boys now. I have done my own bit for him. Now it is your turn. Thought you had said your last farewell? This is my own last farewell and I swear it is. Farewell. Take good care of him*

*Dara*

Minna read the letter some ten times over and each time the words sounded too big to understand. They looked like simple everyday words all right but why was she finding it difficult to understand? As she tried to contemplate what was wrong with her grey matter, she found herself creeping on the floor, and not even feeling the pain of sandy particles that pierced her skin. She felt nothing. Not even her own heartbeat.

She got up but could not stay up for long. She collapsed on the couch but felt as if she had fallen on a bed of broken bottles. She quickly jumped up and squeezed herself across her shoulders. Suddenly she was feeling cold and at the same time, sweat was trickling down her armpits and palms.

Minna managed and leaned against a wall and closed her eyes as she felt all the furniture and pictures in the parlour spin round and round about her. She prayed for the spinning to stop but it did not. Instead, she discovered she was slipping down against the wall and crashing like a fat blob on the cold tiled floor.

With her back against the wall and her legs stretched out in front, she closed her eyes and tried to think of something nice and soothing. All she got were visions of her dearest man cavorting with the ugliest woman in the universe. How could he? Stooping so low and not bothering about her. How could he? She could not help herself. The tears jetted out and she began to pump up her voice like little Ngam. The world could stop now for all she cared. As far as she was concerned, she was dead. She had reached the end.

She cried and cried not bothering whether someone was hearing. Ngam also began to cry and she had the urge to go and strangle him. Instead, she went and stood over him, folding her arms and crying with him. It was not his fault. He did not ask to be born. But here he was, a vivid exhibit of infidelity of the worse kind. How she wished she could develop the level of hatred that would propel her to squeeze the breath out of the fragile lungs. So all along, she had been slaving for her husband's love child. And how he had found it convenient to blame it on Dorothy.

She took a cool bath and with minimal make up, went out of the yard and locking the child alone in the guest room. She was going to brandish the letter for the entire world to see and tell Tetang what she thought of him to the hearing of everyone in his office. Then she was going to file for divorce and strip him of everything he had. And for the children, she would make sure he never set eyes on anyone of them till he died. What did the law say? She brushed the thought aside and walked very briskly, not talking to anyone and not responding to any greetings.

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Most of the taxis she tried to stop were not going the way to Tetang's office. She decided to keep walking. She was not aware of what was going on until she heard a familiar voice as she approached Sister Samba's snack bar. Minna wished she had taken the taxi earlier. Sister Samba's was not the kind of voice she could ignore. She had to branch off towards the bar.

Sister Samba was sitting outside, just by the door of the bar and sipping some palm wine. 'This one has just come from Batibo. Come and have a taste. Fresh and full of yeast.'

Minna shook her head and burst out crying as she sat opposite her friend.

'This one weh na cry so, we better go inside.' Sister Samba rose and led Minna by the hand to her house behind the bar. Minna collapsed on a couch and before she could control herself, her ribs began to vibrate, spilling out her voice in the lament of her life. She cried without any restraint, rocking herself up and down the chair and agitating her head as if someone had tied her whole body and was pricking her legs with pins. Her voice went full throttle and all the corners of her lungs churned to her favour.

Sister Samba sat on a higher straight-back chair, tapping Minna on the shoulders. 'Cry it out my dear,' she encouraged. She knew Minna was not the crying type and if she was crying this time around, then it was very serious. She offered Minna a glass of water when she sensed the crying was abating.

'You shouldn't have been here sister,' said Minna in a halting voice. She blew her nose in a handkerchief.

'You could have phoned me and I would have stayed in bed all day long and watch my business collapse. Which means you would have been making a fool of yourself on the road by sitting on the roadside and crying. And people would say I am a friend of a mad woman.'

'Sister please,' pleaded Minna. 'I am not here to laugh but to cry. That's my duty for today.'

'But ah tink say you don't flop da cry now. If you want to continue, then I'll accompany you. One, two, three go!'

It was the wrong response that came from Minna. 'Go dey sister.'

'You see. You don tire now? Tell me all my sister.' Sister Samba ordered the girl in the snack to bring over her palm wine and two glasses.

'Tetang has killed me sister,' Minna began after she had swallowed half a glass of the fresh palm wine.

'Your Tetang?' said Sister Samba with incredulity. 'I can swear that that man wouldn't hurt a fly. He's too soft for that. Not to talk of hurting you? You of all persons? Tell me really Minna. What did he do? Beat you?'

'Worse than that. I said killed me.'

'But you look alive to me. It can't be that bad.'

Minna cleared her throat. She pulled out a sheet of paper from her purse and handed it to her friend. She was not sure this was right. This was too private but she had no other choice. This was worse than betrayal. She looked away as Sister Samba read and re-read the letter.

'Mmh,' hummed Sister Samba. 'This is even worse than being killed.'

'I told you.'

'Why would he do such a thing to you? Tetang is not the cheating kind. Men cheat but I could swear my last franc that man hasn't looked at another woman since he met you. No, he is too clean for this. What devil possessed him?'

'Wolf in sheep clothing,' breathed Minna, the whole thing still sounding largely unreal. She used to believe in her man like Sister Samba but the letter was a shattering experience.

'Dat matter strong, my sister and na only strong mimbo fit coolam.' Sister Samba asked the girl to serve them whisky. They took it on the rocks.

Minna could feel the burning sensations going down her stomach and then into her whole body. 'Where did I go wrong sister?'

'Don't even go there Minna. Don't try to blame yourself. Not even the tiniest fraction of the blame should go to you. You are the victim here. It's not as if he was some innocent teenager forced into it. No, I bet you he went with his two eyes opened and probably even paid for services rendered. He had his fun while you were there in house chaffing with the children. No, don't dare blame yourself. He is the criminal here and has to pay for it.'

'That's why I regret the fact that you were out there when I was just passing. At this moment, I should be blasting him in front of his boss and asking for a divorce.'

Sister Samba laughed. 'No my sister. I think it is God that kept me there. You don't do this thing like that. I have the experience. My man was the king of cheats when he was still around. But the way I handled him, he was forever on his knees before me till he died.'

'You want to fight it the man's way, he will win. He's more powerful than you, you know. Shout, hit, and curse him in front of his colleagues would win you no sympathy. His friends would even laugh at you. They are birds of the same feather. They all cheat and laugh about it. They will go soft and tell you sorry and all the sweet comforting words. They will even drive you home but once your back is turned, they would laugh at you and tell their girlfriends about it. And they would drag your name in very indecent quarters. No my sister, you are not going to go that low.'

'If the story was from my end, I am sure he will cut off my head before I can even beg for forgiveness.'

'You are right Minna. But the story is not just about you. It is about your children and your home. That is the best security for any woman when such things occur. Your children need their father in spite of his dirty deals and they need a comfortable home for them to grow up balanced. Two of my daughters have gone out of control. Their father wasn't there, that's why. Even if you hate their father, allow them to continue to believe in him for that is good for their state of mind.'

'What you are saying is that I should sacrifice my own happiness for the sake of my children?'

'What is your happiness Min? Isn't it your children? They will support you under the situation. They can discern who the bad person is and it's not you. My children were my greatest comfort when their father went wayward. Toss them aside to do like your man or to nurse your hurt and no one in this our unfair macho society would sympathise with you. Instead, they would castigate you as irresponsible. Free woman. That's what everybody would say. That would not be good for your self-esteem. Punish him but save your home and especially, save your children.'

Minna did not exactly like the direction the conversation was taking. She was out for revenge and they were telling her about saving a home. A home made by two people and where one did not give a damn about the very home? 'So how am I going to punish him?'

'You have the perfect weapon Min. 'Wait when he comes back home. Give him his meal, a good meal and when he is satisfied and is going to bed, carry his baby, place him in his arms and give him his letter after keeping your own copy. Leave him in the room alone and join your children. Cook and serve him his normal meals but leave the baby entirely to him.'

For the first time Minna made a grin. A brief one but it was a sign of calm that was sinking in her chest though the logic in Sister Samba's voice was too strong to swallow. 'I don't think I can ever cook for him again, much less touching that child.'

'The fight of men is often brief and nobody ever wins. Men fight with their emotions and not with their heads. Women's fights on the other hand are drawn and long and at the end, right is distinguished from wrong. That's because we fight with our heads, watching our opponents every move and reacting accordingly. That's why when a woman fights with a man, the woman always wins except she chooses to fight like a man.'

'Sister, what you are advising me to do is not possible. If I remain soft he will think he has no account to render to me.'

'Listen to an old hand Minna. I know the fight with the head demands patience and that is difficult to keep under the circumstance. But if you can find that patience, the victory would be the sweetest one. Have you even thought of the possibility that this so-called Dara could only be trying to make mischief and take advantage of confusion that would probably ensue?'

Minna was stunned. 'Impossible sister, it is the truth. I have seen the look in his eyes and the strange stammer in his voice. And do you know he gave the game away without realising it? When we were first confronted with the baby, he referred to the person who could have brought the child as a she. I asked him why he only thought about a she and he rapped around. Yes sister, he knows the mother of that child and to think I even named him after my grandfather.'

'I remember you told me. But I think you should still be cautious in the way you react. Don't wound yourself. Least of all, don't wound your children. Do as I advised. Hand the child over to him and monitor his reactions. He would go down on his knees and beg like a hungry, lazy dog.'

'I am not prepared to forgive him. Not ever.'

'You don't have to forgive him. Not in the nearest future anyway. Let him be. If he likes he can continue to go outside. Stay quiet, protect yourself and your health, and protect your children and your pride. Remember, slow and easy always wins the race. Just go back

home, cook something delicious and make as if nothing had happened. Where is the child by the way?’

Minna felt her heart tick with guilt. ‘In the house alone.’ She unconsciously carried her head in her hands.

‘You don’t have to fear sister, the child would be fine. If he can stay out in the cold for a long time, then she would be fine in a warm safe house. I know a woman cannot stay indifferent to any needy baby even if she hates the baby.’

‘Men won’t do that,’ said Minna angry with herself for developing sympathy for the baby. ‘I think I should go now and check on him. Let him not die and have the father coming to accuse me of murder.’

‘Before you go, where is my money for the porcupine?’

‘I told you month end now sister. Barely one week from now.’

‘And you never told me the effect, Minna. That was bad of you.’

‘With the surprise gift in my hands? Could I think of any other thing again? Well let me just say my children had one memorable party and the guests were a bunch of primitive snobs. They didn’t touch the food claiming they had already eaten. However, the charm worked for Tetang got the contract.’ Minna flinched in regret at the sound of her husband’s name.

‘That was good now?’

‘If I knew he was such an inscrutable womaniser, I wouldn’t have bothered.’

‘But the children had their treat. That’s what you should concentrate on. Continue to give them more treats.’

Minna rose up from her chair. ‘Weh, Sister Samba. Make Tetang thank God say you dey alive. They would have been digging his grave this moment.’

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The child was sleeping quietly when Minna returned home. Immediately after seeing him, she went to her own bed. She was tired and thought immediately she climbed on the bed, her eyelids would fall. They did not. They were held back in place by thoughts that started simmering in her head.

Why had she allowed herself to be so easily swayed by Sister Samba’s voice? Come to think of it, what did her friend even say besides being charming? All those wonderful words like security, home, children, fighting with the head, not going low had been a calculated ploy on Sister Samba’s part to deflate her determination to fight back.

Now as she lay on the bed, she felt she had to do something and quickly. Something that would leave an everlasting scar on the body or mind of her husband. Kick him, box him, and shout at him, something to inflict pain on him. But he wasn’t there and she no longer had the energy to go out of the house. Sister Samba had rendered her impotent.

Even if Tetang were to appear in front of her, she wasn’t sure she would have actually acted out as devastatingly as it was her initial wish. Sister Samba had pulled the fire from her guns. Minna hated herself for having let the voice of another woman prevent her from executing what had felt so right. Tears erupted from her eyes and she sat up and cried a good one.

Her cell phone rang, striking with some force at her heart. She jumped off the bed and scrambled for the phone that was on her dressing table. Tetang’s number was flashing. Without thinking, she dashed into the toilet, mopped her face with some toilet roll and drank from the sink using cupped hands. She was not going to sound like a poor battered woman in the face of a cheating husband. She was not going to cry or even give him the impression she was distressed. She was going to fight with her head held high. She grabbed the phone nervously.

‘Sweet cherie,’ he began. ‘I bought you a new and far better handbag. The children are coming along with it. I would be back late. I have to go with those clients to visit the site. Remember the contract now?’

The voice and message had a magical effect on her. An even residual resolve to curse him melted. He sounded like the courteous, neat, innocent boy she met seventeen years ago. The cheating image suddenly appeared phoney. Always like him to arouse her good side when she was in a mood to kill. Was he aware of the letter and this was a calculated step at pre-emption? Had Sister Samba called him? No, Sister Samba wasn't the treacherous type. They had been friends for too long for her not to know Sister Samba very well.

Tetang had not exactly left earlier in the morning in a chivalrous mood. Could it be possible that the present and niceness were aimed more at making amends for his bad behaviour earlier in the morning? Maybe he was just being himself. Maybe Sister Samba was right. Dara, whoever she was, was probably just trying to cause trouble. 'All right Tee. Looking forward to my bag and thanks.'

'And Ngam, still troubling you?'

Minna flinched and for a moment was overwhelmed by rage. But it passed. The man was concerned. 'No change.'

'Then as we discussed. He must go down to Widikum this week-end.'

'We'll see,' Minna stammered.

'That's not the ringing endorsement I expected. And your voice, anything the matter?'

'Nothing at all. I am just tired.'

'Ashia baby. Just take it easy. In a couple of days, it will all be over. I put the children in a taxi. They'll be home soon. See you later. My clients are here. Bye.'

Minna kept looking at the phone in her hand long after Tetang had dropped. She squeezed the phone as if she was cursing it for having pushed her not to be aggressive towards her dishonest husband. Why could she not be strong?

Could it be possible that the letter was actually Lisha's handwork? The thought hit Minna like a hammer on her head. Minna would not put it past Lisha to drive a wedge between a couple in order that she could harvest. It was not long ago that a woman chased Lisha right into the school for flirting with her husband. If it were not for the gateman at the school, Lisha would have had a precious part of her body chopped off. Students who saw the incident claimed the woman held a knife.

Minna regretted that she had not persuaded Lisha to stay longer. Minna was sure she would have read off some betraying signals had she dug further about the origins of the letter. Why did it have to be Lisha to bring the letter and not any of the children? All the children, but for Tiffuh who was still in primary school, were at the technical school where their mother taught. They would have been more reliable, not Lisha who lived in Nkwen that was on the opposite side of town. Lisha definitely had some particular interest in this letter. Minna just had to find out.

She picked up her phone and began to dial but stopped it for the children were at the gate. She was not going to involve them. Not yet. After tackling Lisha, she would then decide how she was going to manage the whole show. In the meantime, she would just have to pretend as if nothing had happened. And as far as the child going to her village was concerned, the decision would stay on hold until all her doubts would have been cleared.

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When he returned from the site visit with his clients, Tetang was in such jolly spirits that Minna couldn't find the heart to throw in the damper. The man's happiness was so complete that his shoulders remained above his head as he moved and talked.

The deal he had struck was so good that he promised each member of the family was going to be millionaire. A five-storey block for a big bank and he had exclusive rights to choose the construction company. He was also going to be the overall supervisor. Winning on both sides of the coin. On completion of the project, he was going to dump his civil service job and set up a full-fledge construction firm. This project alone would earn him money that was way above the sum total of his civil service salary for decades.

He rejoiced how he was going to pull his children out of the burdens of day school, and enrol them all in prestigious boarding schools. This particularly touched Minna's softest spot. It had always been her dream to have all her children in boarding schools. She could begin to dream of the enormous possibilities opened to her once she was freed of the bondage of having to take care of a bunch of boisterous teenagers.

She would be free to participate more actively in women's groups, take up some sports, spend more time in a relaxing beauty saloon, visit friends and relatives more often, sleep early and wake up very late and not having to be judging children's fights everyday. Tetang was the one who had even opened her eyes and did she like him for that.

Why not even, go abroad with Tetang as he kept singing. 'You are going to live like a queen,' he told her and she could see he was damn serious. How could she afford to not to live in such dreams? Realistic dreams. She could not destroy the happiness of a family she had built for the sake of some careless love child. With the limitless cash they were going to have, she would get an expensive babysitter to exclusively take care of the child while she would be living the life of royalty.

Fitting the child however in the dream was not going to be as easy as her wish. The child still pestered everyone with his nasty habits and Minna did not like the fact that everyone kept calling him Ngam. The child was no blood relative of hers and should not bear her grandfather's name. She tried in vain to change it to some other neutral name. But everyone liked the name Ngam. They knew that he was Dorothy's child and that the name had been bestowed by the spirit of the deceased patriarch. That was what Minna had told everyone. Nobody thus could understand why she was trying to defy such a very powerful spirit that watched over the family everyday.

Minna knew her change of mind was very logical but she could not find the heart to voice out her justification. How could she when her mind was swinging in the sweetness of Tetang's fantasies? Tetang the cheat! The best she could do was surrender to the status quo, which was that Ngam carried the family blood and his mother, Dorothy, brought him to them. That would be the case until she could find the courage and propitious moment to confront Tetang about the letter. She just had to be patient as Sister Samba had advised.

Minna however nearly blew the lid off when Tetang asked her a very tricky question as they were sitting just the two of them under the plum tree in the yard. Their conversation had begun with agreement on a night out they were planning with Tetang's clients.

'Tell me Min, you don't seem again enthusiastic about sending the child to the village,' said Tetang, stretched out in an old timber rocker.

Minna looked into his eyes, then away, fighting for the courage to brandish the whole story in his untrustworthy presence. She tried to psyche herself up with anger. But immediately she looked into his face, she saw but an angel, which she wanted to cuddle. 'Still am,' she lied.

He could see the lie on her face but surely not what lay beneath. 'I still think it's a good idea for the child to go to Widikum. Even if we are going to come back with him, it is good that your family see him, know the circumstances under which he appeared and officially hand him over to us if that's their wish. In that way, we will know that the child is really ours and we wouldn't give room for whosoever to come and make any claims on him or disturb our new enlarged family. In that way, you and I will accept him fully.'

Quintessential Tetang, thought Minna with some annoying grace. Being practical and generous. Another man would not dream of adopting a sister-in-law's child. But this was not a sister-in-law's child. This was a love child. Was he just trying to outsmart her by continuing to lean on their first convenient theory about the origins of this child, which he himself knew was actually not the case?

The cautious side of Minna pricked her. This man she had loved for a good part of her life could be this double-faced and yet appear genuine? 'You decide,' Minna said and jumped after a mosquito in a desperate guise to distract herself. She was tense.

'So it can only be next weekend. I have to meet surveyors on the site on Saturday.'



'I just knew that was where you were heading for. I locked up for the third week. If I am sacked for absenteeism, don't blame.' Minna spoke with no enthusiasm but still could not find the courage to expose her deep disappointment to the very man who at that very moment she loved and hated at one go.

'I had told you about a babysitter but you shut me up.' There was a sort of triumphant grin on Tetang's face. Minna did not see it. She was still busy hunting for the elusive mosquito while struggling for the courage to tell Tetang off.

'No way. I've coped for two weeks. A third week wouldn't kill me. Got it!' She opened her hands and showed the smear of blood that had been squeezed out of the mosquito. 'What if it turns out that this child isn't really Dorothy's,' she asked slightly out of breath.

Tetang paused for some seconds, anxiety gathering on his face. 'Until that occurs, all the logic for now points to Dorothy. We have thought this thing over and over, haven't we? Initially, I was sceptical but your arguments persuaded me and I still think they sound the best. Or have you had any other clues?'

Minna's heart almost missed there. She wanted to say it but her voice would not come out. She sat back on the chair and rocked herself, looking steadily at the gate. Was it not time to tell what was boiling in her?

The gate bell rang and she sprang up as if someone had just pricked her with a needle. She went, opened, and let in a tall unkempt man with a big tear under the armpit of his dirty shirt.

'Welcome Samson,' Minna recognised him. He drove regularly between Bamenda and Widikum and was the person who always brought letters from her family in Widikum.

'Good evening madam. My moto don full up. I just run for give you this letter. Greet everybody. Bye.' He handed a letter to Minna and immediately turned to go.

'Aha Samson. You no go drink even a glass of water. At least wait let me get some money for my mother.'

'No madam. Tell me how much. I go give your mami then come collect am from you after.'

'All right. Five thousand. When you come next time, you must stay chop, you hear?'

'Yes madam. Before I forget, na me be keep letter for your gate sometime ago. I be de hurry.'

Minna remembered the damn letter but the man had disappeared before she could remember to thank him.

Tetang rose as Minna came back towards him. He stretched himself and yawned. It was getting dark and some birds were already twittering on top of the plum tree for the night.

'Letter from Ma,' Minna said with some sadness and waving the sealed envelop. 'It is addressed to you.'

'Me,' said Tetang poking his chest in surprise. 'That is a first. It must be very serious.'

'Serious is the first word in my mother's dictionary. If I were you, I will read it only after supper.'

'And why?'

'Ma's letters kill the appetite.'

Tetang knew who her mother-in-law was but he felt Minna was being a bit too hard. 'You are talking about the woman that gave birth to you.'

'Very correct. That's why I know what I am talking about.'

'Whatever you say, your highness. I'll read it after supper.'

In trepidation, Minna went after her man with the envelop still in her hand. Ma always wrote punches and this one Minna was sure was not going to be less exacting. Why did Ma write but to her husband? This one was difficult to predict but Minna was sure it was no peace-making document. 'Gird thy loins,' she warned herself. She was also still conscious that she had not answered Tetang's critical question. Why could she not just tell him and damn the consequences?

Minna was in bed with Tetang when he started reading the letter aloud.

*My dear son-in-law,*

*You and your wife have every reason to refuse to help Dorothy. You have done all you could to help her but each time she spat in your faces. And I thank God for you persevered and still helped her whenever she flung herself in a fix. I am not going to make any excuse on her behalf.*

*What I still want you to do with all the blessings of heaven is to give her this last help. After this one, she could die and I for one would not bother. Beg your wife for me to take Dorothy's child. I have tried to convince her to no avail. We cannot blame the child for being born. He should not suffer the sins of his mother.*

*I have written to Dorothy to send the child to you. And I know she is going to do so. If she keeps the child, he will die. But would it not be an abomination to our family to allow an innocent child die for lack of care. People would mock at us and at me in particular. A child belongs to everyone in the family whether he is bad or good. We all therefore have a responsibility to put the child right. It is God's work I am asking you to do and He will bless you abundantly for doing his work.*

*Dorothy is now in Douala, I hear living in the Bonaberi neighbourhood. Ever since she gave birth, she has refused to come home. She is too ashamed. She wanted to send the child to me but I do not have anyone around to help me. Please help me and take the child. Do inform me when the child comes.*

*Your mother-in-law.*

Minna could feel bile pumping into her chest as she sat up and covered her face in her hands. And she had accused her own dear husband? The child was indeed Dorothy's. While that was a relief, the rest of the message of the letter and the very idea of the letter was a real low punch.

It was a new dimension in her mother's repertoire. This was real humiliation. Ma had finally exposed the contempt she had for her first daughter. Telling Tetang all this rubbish, was it not aimed at making her husband to disrespect her. Why should her own Ma hate her so much to the extent of wanting to destroy her marriage? She was the person her mother should be writing to on such delicate matters. Not her husband whose own mother was still alive.

Ma had made it very plain that she Minna was an inherently wicked woman while Dorothy in spite of her backlog of well-recorded sins, deserved forgiveness. The humiliation was too much and Minna began to shed tears. No woman could be proud in her matrimonial home where all the dirty linen in her family was exposed to the husband.

'But why are you crying,' said Tetang surprised.

'Since she cannot get to me, she clings on you knowing it would be more difficult for you to say no. This is blackmail and I am not going to accept it.' Minna ran into the toilet and closed the door. She blew her nose noisily in front of the mirror and cursed the swollen face that was looking at her. She wished she had been born by another woman in some strange far away village and not by a woman who did not even want her to breathe.

Time she put a stop to all the harassment or else she would die and leave her children to suffer. Ma never cared about them. Ma only cared about Dorothy's bastards, all of whom never lived but for this last one. For that reason, it was Minna's exclusive duty to ensure her own children grew up well.

She could not remember any time that her mother had paid them even a surprise visit just to see how the children were fairing. Her mother had never spent up to a week as tradition demanded to wash any of her children when they were born. But Ma would go berserk with concern for Dorothy's child even when Dorothy was yet to give birth. The injustice had to stop. It was make or mar time. Minna jumped back into the room with anger-inspired energy.

Tetang was sitting up as if waiting for her. 'It's no big deal, keeping the child,' said he in a non-committal way.

It was very clear to Minna he was just being polite. The contrary was in his mind. It was no easy business saying no to a mother-in-law. Minna knew all that. She had the experience with her own mother-in-law. The onus was on her to take the lead here. 'No way Tee. It is not going to happen. My mother is not going to destroy me because I have been understanding all my life. That's why she is contemptuous of me. I always bow down to her unfair decisions for the sake of peace. It is not going to happen anymore.'

'Take it easy Min.'

'No Tee,' said Minna raising her voice. 'Enough is enough. Ma has never said thanks for all I have done for her and the family. Dorothy has never thanked me for all the sacrifice I have made for her. Instead, they keep lambasting me and still expect me to suffer again for her baby? Oh no. I have had it up to here with them.'

'Lower your voice, begged Tetang. 'The children are sleeping.'

'I locked their doors. They won't hear.' Minna lowered her voice nevertheless. 'Even if they want to force me to take the child, is this the right approach? Sneaking in a child on my doorstep at night? That I will just go potty at the sight of the innocent bundle and would want to keep and cuddle him forever? Can you imagine the wickedness? My own mother would ask that her own grandchild, which she is head over heels in love with, be dumped naked on a cold floor and alone. Lord forgive me for saying this but this is the work of the devil.'

'Chei Minna! It is not written in the letter that Ma dumped or asked Dorothy to dump the child. You are taking a mole hill for mount Cameroon.'

Minna had her hands on her waist. 'It is even bigger than that. 'Ma judges me as wicked and at the same time is giving me a child to look after? I am wicked and that's why this child is going to the person who is kind and loves him most. His dear grandmother. Not me the devil.'

'I agree. This was not the proper way to hand over the child. I think what we should do is that we take this child along to his grandmother to find out why Dorothy sent him the way she did and hear from the horse's mouth itself what exactly they want us to do with the child.'

So wickedly practical as always, thought Minna who suddenly felt the breath sucked out of her lungs. Tetang had finally stated his wish without taking the path of an unsympathetic in-law and surprisingly, pulling her out of her own moral dilemma. Must he always be a bloody diplomat? Minna had wished he could spit out some fire against Ma like she had done. Show some matrimonial solidarity at least even if he did not feel like exhibiting his dissatisfaction.

'Need anything? I am going for carrot juice. It's Sister Samba's recipe for the reduction of blood pressure.' Minna opened the door.

'Nothing for me. My blood pressure is fine.'

Minna trotted down the corridor, cursing her sister and mother. They were the constant nightmares in her life. Where was all the female solidarity that women had been singing over and over since the Beijing conference?

As she set about filling a cup with carrot juice from the fridge, she thanked her God that she had not splashed the message from the letter in Tetang's face. Thanks to Sister Samba, she would have messed up her marriage.

The letter from Lisha was the product of a roguish mind. But whoever wrote it had failed. Minna trusted her man and loved him even more for the calm way he had handled things thus far. She was angry all right but no blood had been spilled. Handling a marriage in difficulty was more delicate than handling stubborn sisters and mothers.

Minna had to live with the child for three weeks. Her principal was sympathetic after listening to her plea. But the third week was the absolute last. She could not continue to sacrifice her work for a mother and sister who never appreciated anything she did for them. She had already done her own bid of going forth and multiplying and God was her witness. Besides, the child was such a nuisance that even that residual sympathy that children always invoked in adults had petered out. His constant nauseous cries and disgusting eating habits had torn to the last nerve of everyone in the house.

Minna had seen her loving husband transform from a mild and tolerant person to a bad-tempered, constantly whining man who was developing the bad habit of swearing and cursing to the hearing of even the children. Most of the nights, he had to run away from the matrimonial room which had become the permanent quarters for Ngam's cot.

Even Akwen who had the heart of gold could not continue to stomach the noise, which Ngam made as if he was born to punish others. Maybe the mother had dumped him due to his untamed habits. Maybe his father, whoever he was had transferred his wild genes to him. If a woman could not love her own baby then why should another woman care? That was Minna's conclusion.

Though Minna was bent on seeing the child out of her house, there at the back of her mind, constantly looming was the fear of the reaction of the family and especially that of her mother. She was angry with her mother, yes, but she still cared enough to fear the burden she was about to cast on the old woman could aggravate her already fragile health.

Minna was also still not very at ease with the moral dimension of this decision. Society was going to damn her for throwing an innocent child out of her house and Ma was going to see into it that the whole world was informed. Nobody would bother about her justification. They would all say she was uncaring and selfish. But the thought of living just one more day with the child was suicidal. She was not going to lose her husband for the sake of a child who could be better taken care of by his mother or grandmother for that matter. To hell with society.

Once in the village, they were going to find a way of assuaging the burden on Ma. The family members would help provide the solution if it came to it. If Ma was going to make things difficult, Minna was going to present her case to her father. Minna knew Ma would rather die than have difficulties in her home being exposed to her husband who would make it a laughing matter with his other wife. But if her Ma were to push it too much, Minna was going to use blackmail to force her mother to take the child.

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Saturday morning, they boarded an old Land Rover at the motor park. They had to pay double in order to sit in the cabin, sharing the back seat with four other passengers. It was tight but manageable. This was the most comfortable way of travelling to Widikum where the road was an appalling, forsaken track. And it was the rainy season.

Every time Minna had to go to the village, the thought of the horrible road often made her change her mind. But not now. Tetang equally shared the sentiments and he could not hide it when the driver finally decided it was time to move after they had spent close to four hours waiting for the vehicle to get full. 'If I knew your village was out of civilisation before I met you, I would have stayed a bachelor.'

'One more of that and I will leave this child with you and go back to my village alone. After all, the child was sent to you. Ma made that clear.'

The vehicle left the park quite late: in the middle of the afternoon. And with the atrocious road, the driver just had to be going at pedestrian pace. They got to Widikum when the night was quite advanced. Most people had gone to bed but for isolated groups of

men bingeing on palm wine and making irreverent noises. Tetang had paid the driver extra to take them right into the family compound where the quiet was total. .

Also total was the enveloping darkness that was almost palpable. Minna could guess why not even a single electric lamp was on. The electricity corporation had switched off for unpaid bills. This was one unanticipated charge Minna was going to bear. No arguments there. It was just over a week ago that she had sent five thousand francs through Samson the driver. That was more than enough for the electricity bill but her father had other priorities.

Minna had no choice but to cough up more. That was how she always slaved for the family and with little appreciation. But if this one meant she was going to be relieved of Ngam, then it was no big deal.

Minna knew the compound by instinct and led her husband straight to her mother's house. Minna's heart was beating hard as she feared how her mother was going to take this unannounced visit. The visit where Ma's own first daughter was about to punish her with a baby. Ngam was on Minna's back, sleeping nicely as she knocked on the door. He had really been a gentleman throughout the journey - no crying and no fussing. Responding positively to Minna's half-hearted attention.

There was no response after several knocks. Minna went straight to the window of her Ma's bedroom. After just a knock, Minna heard a groan and she revealed her identity. Maybe this was not right, she told herself. Her mother was too fragile for this. This was not fair. But it was too late now to turn back for somebody was already opening the door. The light from a kerosene lamp slashed through the pitch-blackness as if an angel had appeared.

A sharp cry of joy erupted as Minna fell in the arms of her favourite aunt, Auntie Aggie. Just the person to lift her spirit. Auntie Aggie was Ma's last sister who used to live with them when they were younger. Auntie Aggie was barely eight years older than Minna and was more like an older sister to Minna than an aunt.

Auntie Aggie's husband died many years back leaving her without a child. Unable to bear the taunts of her in-laws over her barrenness and the pity of her own relatives, she ran away to live with her older sister. Minna had completely forgotten about her otherwise she would not have been knocking her head about who would help Ma to take care of the child. Minna became hysterical and clung on her aunt for quite a while.

'Me too ah dey oh,' said Tetang who had waited long enough to make Auntie Aggie realise he also was breathing.

Auntie Aggie embraced him too before focussing on the child. 'You really have some explaining to do. How come you had a child and you never sent me word? I thought I was your favourite person.' Auntie Aggie removed the baby from Minna's back.

'Just leave me oh, Auntie. Na long story.' Minna twisted herself in relief as the weight of the baby was lifted off her back. Tetang followed her in with their luggage, which consisted of two large suitcases and a bag. The guests settled on some stools by a dormant fire with fading embers on a burnt-out log struggling to survive behind inert ash.

'He is already this big,' said Auntie Aggie examining the child closely. 'How old is he?'

'Six to eight months,' said Minna non-chalantly. She was still thinking how Ma would react once she came out of her room. She did not realise her aunt was hitting her with biting eyes.

'What do you mean?'

Minna realised where all that came from. She sighed and smiled. She knew she had sowed seeds in her aunt's mind. Her aunt was probably dreaming there was some hot scandal about to explode. Auntie Aggie loved scandals and she was an expert at peddling them. 'In everything give thanks,' Auntie Aggie said, her voice dropping as if in pity for her niece.

'Amen,' Minna concurred, further fuelling her aunt's excitement.

'Is there something we can eat?' asked Minna pressing her belly.

'Of course,' squealed Auntie Aggie. She handed the child back to Minna and set about gathering wood on the fire and manipulating the embers into hot flames.

'I thought Ma was up,' said Minna wondering whether Ma had deliberately stayed back. Minna could have sworn the first voice she heard when she knocked on the window was her Ma's voice. Ma was not pleased to see her? It would not surprise her. Maybe she had guessed what the aim of this impromptu visit was about and did not like it.

'She was probably dreaming,' said Auntie Aggie. She is no longer the alert tigress she used to be. She sleeps like a stone. Your Ma isn't getting any younger, you know now. Why not go and check on her.'

Minna got up in trepidation when she suddenly heard a movement coming from the room. She would just jump out of the window and fly if her Ma dared shout at her. How could she be afraid of her own mother? As she turned around, there was Ma, old, slightly bent at the waist, stumbling out of the room with one hand supporting the waist and her face puckered like a woman in labour. She had to support herself on the jamb of the door before finally stepping into the open room.

'Anything the matter Ma?' Minna tossed the child back to Auntie Aggie and rushed towards her mother with concern. In spite of the negative feelings swirling in her mind, she loved her mother. She held her mother to support her.

'I am not yet an invalid oh,' said the old woman, shrugging off the hand and vigorously too. Then she held her daughter in an embrace. A brief one. Minna shook her head, depressed. It was not going to be easy, she concluded quietly.

'Welcome my son,' Ma went towards Tetang in steadier strides and embraced him too. 'It's my lucky day today, seeing you people after a long time. What's it? Four years? And where are my children?'

'They are not yet on holidays Ma. They are still in school,' Minna replied aware Ma was only trying to set traps.

'Excuse me for never having gone to school but I think this is the weekend.' She did not wait for a response but went straight to her sister who was struggling to stir some food on the fire while rocking a baby on her feet. 'And where's that baby from?' she fired at her sister.

'You didn't know too? Minna's baby.' Ma's sister could not hold her peace.

Ma laughed gleefully. 'Minna had long thrown down her tools. Her eggs are exhausted like the ones this old bag carries.' She slapped her belly. 'It can't be her baby.' Ma grabbed the child from her sister, studied the face with the dull light of the lamp and burst out in excitement. 'This must be Dorothy's baby. You finally got him? Praise the Lord.'

'Dorothy's baby?' blurted Auntie Aggie. 'Since when? You see.' She turned towards Minna angrily. 'I am the one who keeps your mother safe in this compound but she never tells me anything.'

Minna did not know what to say. Ma pretended as if she had not heard. She pressed the child against her chest and made as if the child was the only thing of interest in the room. She proceeded to sing and dance on the spot. She dug out old lullabies, which she serenaded the baby with. Songs, which Minna could remember.

The songs filled Minna's heart with a yearning for the ages gone. Ages when her Ma was fair and loved each of her three children with equal measure. Minna would have loved to accompany her Ma like she used to do. But her mind was full of sadness for the contemptuous way Ma was treating her.

Auntie Aggie, noticing the tension in the air, switched on her own voice to accompany her sister. Hers was more of a peace-making endeavour than a plain manifestation of joy. She moved from Minna to her husband and back to her sister hoping to appease the guests and get them to join in. But not Minna. She stood still, stone-faced and even frowned when Ma's back was turned. Tetang watched in awe. He was not sure what was going on but was certain Ma was not praising them.

'You should have sent me a message the child had come?' Ma said to Minna.

Minna said nothing. She was too upset to get her brains function well. She went and sat back on her stool and bowed her head.

'I thought I had lost you, but the Lord is very kind.' Ma resumed her singing, focussing all her attention on the child as if he was the gift she had been waiting for all her life. This was all part of the demonstration of discrimination, Minna resolved. Ma had never been this passionate about any of her children though they were her first grandchildren. This made Minna to hate the child all the more and she turned her face away as a consequence.

Ma had not even sought to find out how their journey was but was already in paradise having seen Dorothy's print in flesh and blood. No other thing or person for that matter was relevant.

'I don't get it,' entered Auntie Aggie, breaking off the singing. 'This is Dorothy's child and it is Minna and her husband who have brought him? Why? Where's Dorothy?'

Minna thanked her aunt quietly for being perceptive. She raised her face towards her mother, anxious to get the response.

'Is it everything that you have to know? Give food to our guests and stop asking me stupid questions.' Ma sang on.

'And why do you think I put this pot on the fire?' said Auntie Aggie with some irritation.

'Then get on with it and leave me alone.' Ma sat on a chair with the baby, stretched out his hands and feet, caressed his small face and began invoking the spirits of her ancestors that she loved. Her father, her mother, her sister who died while still young and the late chief of their village who was her father's stepbrother. Her incantations soared to a pitch where one would have thought she had reached the stage of hallucinating. This was just for a child or a macabre shot to spite Minna?

'Let me put him to sleep.' Minna rose to take the child. She felt her mother was tired after all the exertion. The old woman was already out of breath.

'Aha, you think he cannot sleep in my arms?' Ma said, holding the child against her chest. 'These arms are better than any bed for my grandchild.'

Minna sat down and felt like a fool. Was there something that she did in the past that had caused her mother to hate her this much? She could not think of anything. Maybe she should ask her father. There must be something. A woman would not hate her first daughter just for nothing.

She was the one who used to accompany Ma to the farm. She was the one who used to work from dawn to dusk. She was the one who used to take care of her younger sister and brother. But the younger sister who was the rogue and the man chaser was the one who had eaten their mother's heart.

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How Minna wished her younger brother, Nchoh, was around. He was the only one who used to beat some fear in Dorothy's heart and could force Ma to behave fairly. Since he took off down south and married some local girl, no one had seen or heard from him. They had even had news that he had built his house there and taken an oath to settle in the impenetrable creeks.

With him gone, the whole family had turned upside down. Dorothy's antiques had grown unrestrained and Ma's sense of fairness had depleted. Pa was too busy coping with ageing and his younger children to ensure there was order in the line with his first wife.

Minna sat quietly and watched in amazement as Ma scooped out some cocoyam from the pot on the fire and mashed a piece between her unwashed fingers. No, Minna could not stomach it. In spite of the child's bad habits she always upheld the highest standards of hygiene when feeding him. Besides, cocoyams for the child at night? 'Ma, no. That is too harsh for the child.'

'Says who?' blurted Ma cutting a sharp eye at her daughter.

'At least you should wash your hands.' Minna was blunt. She just had to say it.



'This is the village if you don't know. It is this dirt that makes us strong and stronger than you civilised people. We don't get the kind of illnesses that you people get. Besides, this is the very hand that fed you and I think you turned out fine.' Ma sent the food down the mouth of the child and the child readily took it.

That was another shocker for Minna. The child took the food without any protest and he kept accepting the subsequent chunks with relish. Minna could not believe this was the very child with whom she always had to fight a fierce battle for food to go down his mouth and even more delicious food. A child who always wanted nothing but milk was actually gorging cold cocoyams and smacking his lips?

What was more, the child was rolling happily on Ma's laps as if it was some old reliable playground of his. 'Ma, what did you do to this child that he is eating with such appetite and seems to be enjoying himself?'

'You thought I was completely finished now? I may be old but I still have the magic that brought you up like your sister and brother. These arms are a safe haven for any child of mine.'

'I know that Ma but this child is a real wild one.'

'Don't you dare say a thing like that about this child. He is not wild. All a child needs from any person is just love and affection. And it must come from your heart. You may not know this but children see the heart. Pretend and they will know it and would respond negatively to you. A child has to trust you to do whatever you want. If he doesn't trust you, he will make your life a misery. This child is gentle and handsome. Just like his mother.'

'Chei Ma,' entered Ma Aggie fed up with her sister's oblique attack of Minna. 'How can you tell this child resembles Dorothy with this dull light? I think he resembles his father whoever he is.'

'Shut up,' fired Ma. 'This is none of your business. He is my grandchild, not yours. I insist he resembles Dorothy.'

'Who is the father by the way?'

'Agnes, mind your business. Father or no father, this is my grandchild and I am going to keep him.'

Minna turned and eyed her husband. He fisted his hands under the cover of darkness. God working in a mysterious way. It sounded too good for Minna to accept it was genuine. She had been expecting hard-hitting resistance not a positive response from Ma when the question had not even been raised. 'Do you think that is a good idea Ma?' Minna asked without thinking.

'Why not?' said Ma with enthusiasm. 'Because I sent you people that damn letter? I don't know what I was doing. I was probably just depressed. I am sure that boy who wrote it for me added his own ideas.'

'But it was not the only letter.'

'It doesn't matter now, does it? I have changed my mind. Now that I have seen him, I am going to keep him.'

'No, you are going to bring him up,' corrected Minna.

'I forgot you were a teacher. Yes of course I am going to bring him up. What is so special about that? I am not a finished woman oh, if that's what you are thinking. Even if you are not prepared to help me, I have huge farms, I make gallons of palm oil, and there are many people in this compound who are only too willing to give me a hand. Bringing up one child is no big deal.'

Minna was not sure about the source of the enthusiasm but she did not want to spoil her mother's joy by reminding her she was a patient. She had a better idea. 'Why not get Dorothy to come and help you raise her child.'

'I don't need her to raise a child.'

'But it's her child and every child needs his mother.'

'He is not the first child or the last to be raised by a woman other than the direct mother. Besides, what's the difference between Dorothy and me? If you don't think you

and Dorothy are the same people, I don't think that way. My children and I are one. Meaning, this child is as much mine as it is Dorothy's.

Minna bit her lips and wanted to raise her voice. Why was her Ma always looking for the slightest opportunity to dehumanise her? Tetang pressed her discretely on the shoulder to remind her to take it easy. They were on a special mission and had vowed to use diplomacy as the tool to achieve their objective and they were succeeding thanks to God's intervention. But Minna had to clear every cloud. 'This child has not had all his vaccines Ma. Are you sure you can follow that up?'

'Don't talk to me about vaccines. I never vaccinated any of you but you are healthy and strong. Let me tell you something. Vaccines do nothing but make us vulnerable to strange illnesses. All these illnesses like chicken pox, measles, malaria and the rest were brought to us through vaccines. When I was born, we never knew of such illnesses. Just forget about vaccines for this child. He is going to grow up a strong, virile man.'

'Ma leave talk make people dem chop,' said Ma Aggie serving out the food on two plates.

'This child is wet. Where are his things?' Ma rose with the child and headed for her room. Minna took the suitcase that was against the wall and went after Ma. Ma placed the child on her bed and lit another lamp before ordering her daughter to leave them alone and go to eat. Minna went back to join her husband, feeling like a chastised child. She prayed for dawn to come quickly so she could rush back to a home where she was cherished and even worshipped.

Ma came back into the main room only after the guests had eaten their fill. She was coming just to bid them good night but they had to discuss with her.

'I thought you people should rest now and we discuss tomorrow,' said Ma following a polite request from her son-in-law for them to discuss.

'Ma we would be leaving very early in the morning. We have already booked with the vehicle.'

'It can be cancelled now.'

Tetang knew his mother-in-law was no small measure woman. 'I have an appointment with the doctor tomorrow which means I have to be in Bamenda unfailingly tomorrow.'

'Then Minna can wait.'

Minna wanted to cut in but Tetang stopped her. 'For three weeks, she has stayed at home to take care of this child. She has test papers accumulated over these three weeks to mark and she has to hand them on Monday.' Tetang was certain his lie was not full proof. Her mother had eyes for the slightest loose end. She was however more interested in another revelation.

'Do you mean you have been keeping this child for three weeks and you didn't have the courtesy to inform me?'

'We were not sure the child was Dorothy's,' said Minna forcefully.

'You mean you can see your own flesh and blood and not recognise him?'

Minna's flood banks of rage broke. 'Ma, that's not the question to ask. You should ask what I mean by we were not sure. You've not found out how the baby came to us.'

'But that's obvious now. Dorothy brought him to you. I asked her to do so. She wouldn't disobey me like that. She sent the child through some other person?'

'She dumped the child on our veranda at night and vamoosed.' Minna shouted. 'We didn't even see her. She didn't bother to contact us. How could we therefore be sure this was her child?'

'She did that?' said Ma in an pretensively hurt voice. 'What a coward! What was she afraid of? That you will kill her? Her own sister? No she shouldn't have done that. Well, the child is with us, safe and sound. There is no longer any problem. I only hope you haven't made a scandal of it. People would laugh at us.'

'This is not you Ma,' entered Auntie Aggie with indignation. 'I am shocked that Dorothy should do such horrible a thing and the least you can say is that she was a coward? A child from her own womb? She is not a coward but a wicked girl.'

'Don't you dare call my daughter that.'

'I will call her that. Wicked! Prostitute! You should be grateful to Minna and her husband for rescuing the family out of such shame. What if the child had died? Ma, I don't know what has come over you. This is not fair. The person who should be getting the stick is Dorothy and not poor Minna.' Minna thanked her God quietly for her sweet aunt.

'Stop interfering,' said Ma, still trying to sound arrogant.

'I will not stop. I can't stand injustice especially when I know it is clear who the villain is. It is not Minna and her husband. The villain is you and Dorothy.' Auntie Aggie turned to Minna and her husband. 'You people can go back as early as you want and you should go with your clean consciences. You have done your own bit and done it well. I am going to see into it that he is brought up well. Take no notice of Ma. She is the one spoiling Dorothy, I keep telling her but she does not want to see that.'

'Interfering widow.'

'Make e be Ma, but you can no longer shut me up and I am not going to allow you hound the wrong persons. You people go to bed and leave the rest to me. Ma has to stop all this.'

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And Ma did keep quiet. Minna was shocked. Pleasantly shocked. So there was one person in the world who could keep her mother in her place? Minna admired her aunt even more. Where did she get this authority over Ma? It did not matter. It was good. Minna felt a genuine smile blow over her face for the first time since she entered Widikum. Her mother had her equal in Auntie Aggie.

The guests rose to go to bed as Ma began to intone some song she used to sing when she was a girl. Was it nostalgia? Regret for the loss of youth or an actual effort at appeasing her soul after the bruising from her sister's rage? Minna wondered and somehow felt pity for her mother. The distance between Ma and her was growing ever wider and she was helpless to stop it. She loved her mother. Why could her mother not see that and give her back even just a bit? 'Keep some hot water Auntie. Ngam would wake up and want milk.'

'Who's Ngam?' asked Ma jumping out of her reverie.

Had she put another foot wrong? Minna feared. The way her mother was behaving, she could no longer predict her reactions. 'Since the child came with no name, I thought I could as well name him after your father,' she said nervously.

Ma swallowed some spit with force. 'That was very thoughtful of you,' said she, a smile glowing on her face. A smile founded on deep precious thoughts.

'My father has come back to me. Welcome back Pa.' Ma pressed her eyelids and sniffed as if she was about to cry. 'Pa was a good man. A much-respected leader in our village. Even the chief respected him. He was always the first to be called when there was any crisis and his judgement was like gospel. He had twenty-one of us and cared equally for everyone. He was such a warm father. I lost him, now he is back. Thank you Pa God.' She raised her hands heavenwards.

Minna closed a hand on her face and felt somewhat cheered. At least, this was one good thing she had done that her mother really appreciated. She was not after all completely bad. It was with that positive mindset that she went after her husband into the room, which Auntie Aggie had vacated for them.

'You nearly spoil it,' whispered Tetang as she slipped on the bed behind him.

'Spoilt what?'

'Ma declared without any request that she was going to take the child and you went examining her whether she was fit?'

'She is my duty also, Tee.'

'You should have thought of that before agreeing to bring along the baby. I only pray that she does not have any nightmare this night that may compel her to change her mind.'

'No she wouldn't,' said Minna with desperate hope.

'I would accept that only when I would have left this place without that unbearable child.'

Minna gathered herself in his embrace wanting strongly to be in one accord with him like she had never wanted before. Her life was already too full of conflicts as it was. They slept peacefully.

The driver entered the compound at five in the morning. This time it was an ancient Toyota pick-up. There was no time to greet everyone especially as they had to conclude the position of Ngam with Ma. Ma looked very positive when she joined her daughter and her husband outside. The name Ngam was probably the magic. She greeted her daughter and husband with real warmth and even thanked them for saving the child's life. She wished them a safe journey and promised to take good care of the child.

After some brief exchanges with Minna's father during which the man was given some money to pay the electricity bills and some extra for drugs, Minna and her husband left with relief and happiness that they had not known for the past three weeks. Ngam their nightmare was off their backs and they could once again begin to live like an ordinary family.

**N**gam was the least of Minna's concerns as her hair stylist made the last adjustment on the banana style. Over one month since the child was left with his grandmother, they were back on the roll, living the life of an ordinary happy family, exercising its normal harmonious routines. No more intolerable noises and discordant manners.

The episode however made Minna become conscious of one thing: that her children were even more mature and stable on their own than she had been thinking. They had handled the turbulence very well, even better than she had. Maintaining their cool when she ignored them to take care of Ngam and even performing some of her duties without complaining.

Her children were indeed independent young adults or at least growing into that. This was indeed a turning point. She realised she could begin to liberate herself from some of her maternal duties which mentally she had claimed as compulsory responsibilities for life, and she would still breathe. She could begin to indulge herself in some more self-centred pursuits and the whole house would not collapse.

Tetang had realised this long ago and had long taken advantage of it. The fact that he had begun to slip away from helping the children with their homework, which used to be his exclusive duty, was a clear indication he had realised the children could cope on their own. He went out more often and began staying for longer periods. Minna could now see that their nightclub venture had been his way of forcing her to come out of her mental prison and take advantage of a well-deserved freedom. She had worked very hard to rear responsible children and she could now play.

There began a life for them which was like a second honeymoon. He bought her presents and every weekend, they were out. She began to have a try at alcohol, a thing she had never bothered about. All the women she knew drank nothing less than beer. Why then should she be the odd one?

The hair she had just done was meant for a party Saturday night. Bobe, a renowned businessman was inaugurating his restaurant and they had invitations. Tetang also wanted to use the opportunity to give a treat to clients who had given him a very lucrative contract. Minna as a consequence had to be in her best. The fortune the family was about to make was momentous.

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Their dressing this time around was more respectable but dashing. Minna, in a silky blue, knee length frock and Tetang in a fashionable grey sarong, Arabic style. They left the house at a more holy time of seven. Minna chattered all the way and though she did not have any particular thing to talk about, one did not need any imagination to tell she was excited.

Her role for the night was not going to step further than the presentational from the way Tetang had told her. That however was not her private plans. She did not intend to stay just an anecdote in a crowd that was going to include the glitterati of Bamenda with his Excellency the Governor in the lead.

Minna did not know how the place looked like but trusted that like most of the time, Tetang would take her to a good place. She did not know much about good places in town for her life had been spent raising children, loving their father and agonising over the mischief of her sister and mother. But gloom was no longer going to be part of her life and she was henceforth going to be selfish with her sentiments. If Ma and Dorothy were not going to adjust to her own needs now, then stuff them. She was a new and more realistic woman.

Tetang manoeuvred the car in the only proper two-way street in the whole of Bamenda

- the Commercial Avenue. The long drawn economic crisis had reduced this formerly sleepless nerve wire of the town to a more laid back, almost monastic hub. Traffic was a trickle, the street lamps were permanently off and the spots of light that filtered to the inert tarmac came from dispersed bars where compulsive night geezers struggled to wear off the stresses of a miserable day.

There was one spot however where misery was a far-flung concept. It was the newest outfit in town and tonight was its inaugural. Fleets of flamboyant cars were already parked on both sides of the street and even on the central island.

Bobe could be counted upon to pull out the crowd that mattered in Bamenda. Many had fetted on his largesse and just had to oblige when he beckoned. Tetang was the one who drew the plan of the luxurious house where the magnate was residing. That made Tetang a sure candidate to be invited. Bobe had also kindly given other invitations to Tetang to bring along rich friends.

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FRILLS stood on top of a three-storey block that had the shape of a truncated cone. Tetang parked on the opposite side of the street and led his wife to the side of the building. Here was located a wide spiral staircase enveloped by timber and tinted glass. One had the sensation of floating upwards in the open, sombre air as one mounted the stairs. Not a tedious climb by any means as the flashing lights and sounds of the town flooded in as powerful distractions.

Minna was definitely not out of breath but felt light in the head when she got to the last floor. It was not often that she climbed stairs. This experience left her slightly nauseous. However, the journey into the restaurant was just a remarkable adventure. Guests were led down a corridor that was lined on both sides by potted flowers and shrubs that gave the feeling of natural gardens. And the plants were natural. Minna looked up and saw the glass roof, which during the day filtered only the best light that made the plants very lush. Shimmering stars could be seen through the glass roof this night.

Minna had the impression of walking into a new dimension as she went after Tetang into a large hall, which with mirror panelled walls created an atmosphere of plurality and yet giving the choice for privacy. The place was crowded but the lights that bounced off the mirror panels had the dual effect of making the air translucent thus protecting some level of privacy while still illuminating every internal décor.

Tetang led Minna to a table that was by a stage where some men were assembling a musical band. It was a long time that they had seen a band live and this was going to be a once-in-a life opportunity. There were not many bands in Bamenda and those that existed did not perform in places that they were used to.

Minna's inhibitions were already taking flight as she sat by her husband on a table meant for four. Her heart jiggled in excitement as the musicians tested and adjusted their instruments. She could see seriousness on their faces and though their efforts for the time were not harmonious, the overall impact was the whipping up of the appetite.

The blend of aromas from beer, hot drinks, fruit juices and exotic foods filled the air, making Minna to pity those who did not have the chance to be here. Her saliva was flowing, her muscles were aching to move around and dance and she was thirsty.

Tetang gave the orders. They were both served glasses of some light, fruity cocktail that had an umbrella-shaped slice of lemon hanging on the side of the glass. It had a sweet alcoholic taste and simmered in the mouth before descending softly down the gullet. Minna did not know what it was called, neither did her husband but she could have ten of them and would not be satisfied. But, this was a place where style and attitude mattered more than substance. She had to stay moderate and instead of gulping the drink like some mean soak, she licked at it like a tender lamb.

Tetang kept looking at his watch and Minna could see the anxiety building on his face. 'Why not call them, maybe they have forgotten.'

'No, they are going to be here,' said Tetang with feigned certainty. His clients had conditioned their coming on not having other business commitments.

Bobe appeared on the stage. He was a big ugly man dressed in over-flowing agbada but his money was not ugly. 'Ladies and gentlemen, sorry for keeping you waiting this long. Drink as much as you can. It is on the house but not the food. We have to pay the band now. Have a good time and when you leave, go and tell your friends and relatives the treasure that is here. What you see here today, is what is going to be here everyday and I promise you even better times ahead. Enjoy yourselves.'

The guests applauded and the band exploded in some popular number. A popular folk tune, very rhythmic and inspiring. A most appropriate opener. Most of the guests were on their seats, shaking their heads and shoulders and admiring the dexterity of the musicians.

Tetang's phone vibrated against his chest as guests applauded. He ran out to the men's room, where it was quiet. His clients were on the other side. He was not out for a minute before he came back, his face crestfallen. He narrated the brief call with a sad voice. His clients could not come, as he had feared. They had other business imperatives.

Tetang was deeply disappointed. He had wanted to use this occasion to demonstrate how very grateful he was for the contract award. He had not been the only competitor in the market and had to show appreciation for the rare opportunity and if for anything else, to ensure that the deal was set in concrete.

'It wasn't a business meeting after all. Take it easy.' Minna tried to console him.

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As they bowed their heads over plates of pepper-soup yams and fish for Minna, roast pork and plantains for Tetang, a late couple appeared. The whole place was full and one of the few vacant places left were on this table. Minna looked up and had to blink several times to ascertain they had met the couple before.

The woman was squeezed up in tight-fitting trousers that had flares and a tiny, hugging blouse that ended above her navel. It was a most bizarre and indecent picture Minna had ever seen. Ripples of greasy flesh flowed everywhere giving the picture of an alien species. The woman was so bleached that she looked like an embalmed wall ghecko. The woman was dazed and Minna felt she would collapse and push down the man on whom she was leaning on the floor.

The contrast between the man and the woman could not be starker. He looked even thinner and frailer than when Minna last saw him but he was standing on his own feet and actually carrying the enormous weight of the woman who was wobbling on his shoulders like old underpants. Minna could see the strain on his face but he looked like a man who was used to suffering.

Minna wanted to stand up to greet the woman who had done for her a good turn but the unsteady look on the woman's face was a turn off. Now that she was already drunk, Minna could not imagine what would happen should she touch just one more cup. And they had just arrived.

The woman almost smashed Minna's leg as she collapsed on the chair by Minna. Minna smelled stale alcohol from the woman's breath and flinched. It almost killed her appetite but Tetang was paying a fortune for the food. Minna just had to keep eating. Besides, what moral authority did she have when she was on a glass of cocktail that was not alcohol free?

'Sorry for bothering you,' the man apologised fitting himself in the last empty chair. 'I was looking for a more discrete corner but no space.'

The man's voice was as frail as his whole bearing. Was he having some contagious disease? Minna wished he would not talk more. He looked like he was even straining while speaking. Also, Minna was afraid his saliva could fall in her plate for he looked like a man with a very watery mouth. She and Tetang kept quiet, nibbling on their delicious meal and pretending that that alone mattered in the whole world.

The man however was not in a mood to stay dumb. 'We would have been here since,



but she just has to be drinking every blessed hour. I had to drag her out of a bar or else we would not even have come.'

'Shurrup,' slurped the woman her head lolling from side to side and her eyes half closed. 'You're not my papa. Shurrup!'

'Excuse her for being rude. But she is actually a nice woman.'

Minna eyed her husband and then the man whose voice had come out as if it was a taped message. The man was that stupid?

'I am Njotu Albert and she is Bridget.'

So? Minna nearly said. She was already fed up with the man's raspy voice and the shameless drunk by her side. How she wished they could leave and get other seats. She threw a panoramic view around but saw only faces and no vacant seat. She would have proposed to Tetang that they moved elsewhere if she had seen a vacant table. The woman or Bridget smelled of some other thing that was even worse than alcohol. Minna got the odour. It was like the smell of a woman who had not had a bath for ages. Minna slapped a hand over her nose and could no longer eat. She pushed the plate aside and leaned against the back of her seat.

'Eat your food Madam. Don't let her bother you.' It was the Albert man again talking like an infant with no sense of perception.

'I'm okay,' said Minna curtly, not looking at the man. Why could they not just get lost?

Bridget placed her hands on the table and before long, began to sleep. That was disgusting but it was better than seeing her sullen face and watching her drunken gestures. At least it could allow Minna the peace to watch the band. A popular musician was sauntering on the rostrum and the crowd was going bonkers.

Bebe Manga in her portly operatic figure dominated the rostrum. She held the microphone in her suave, imposing style as Minna had often seen on television. And when her voice broke through the concentrated silence that was daring her, she did not disappoint. Just her first words were greeted with noisy ovation and not just because they were the opener to a very popular tune. The audience was especially affected by her sharp, almost girl-like voice that strummed away right to those elusive nerves that tended to keep people taut and lifeless.

Before she realised what was going on, Minna was on her feet, twisting and clapping to a mesmerising makossa song that the star handled with elegance and class. Minna's last worries had taken leave of her as she bobbed her shoulders up and down and even attempted at wiggling her waist. She was getting a fair bit heavy around there, but what the heck! She was alive and if it bothered anyone, then they could go to hell. After all the only man she could die for was still desperately in love with her.

Tetang stood up also though more out of solidarity with his wife than really enjoying the show. He was still disappointed his clients could not make it. He was not up for a minute when the applause grew more thunderous as the crowd became aware with deep regret that the performance was about to end. The star bowed with much charm while the audience screamed for more. The night show had however just begun. It was supposed to be until morning so there was still time and the star told them just that.

When Minna sat down, she was surprised her neighbour was still sleeping in spite of the entrancing noise. The woman's brains were definitely well fried. Albert sat still like a guilty man about to face the firing squad. He looked like a man who did not have the slightest idea what was going on but had to sit through the show as some kind of compulsory routine. He must be having a tough time with his woman, Minna resolved. Minna pressed her lips together in contempt for the strange couple as Tetang rose to go for some air. He was still brooding. Minna understood and did not complain.

Minna grabbed another glass of cocktail and sipped quietly, waiting and thinking how good life could be if people could concentrate only on those things they could handle. She would not have been having the time of her life if she had not stopped wallowing over the impossible attitude of her mother and especially, Dorothy. She had flushed out the

poisonous effect their loathsome behaviour was having on her. Imprisoning her in a state of self-pity and gloom. The thought of them no longer worried her, at least not on this exceptional night. Not after the enthralling music.

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Tetang was taking much longer than she had imagined. Had he gone just for air or was in the toilet taking care of a running stomach? She had seen him rubbing his stomach and shifting on his chair. All signs of some discomfort. She smiled. She was going to laugh at him later. She had pleaded with him to go easy on the pork. He had gorged quite an enormous portion. She did not know she had a carnivore for a husband.

‘What’s funny?’

The unexpected voice of Albert jolted Minna out of her thoughts. ‘Funny?’ she said feeling guilty.

‘You were smiling.’

‘Oh, nothing in particular.’ Minna turned her face away from Albert sending a clear message she was not interested in any conversation. Where was Tetang?

‘Can you remember me?’ The voice came from the figure that was still folded over the table and it sounded strained.

Minna ignored it pretending she did not hear.

‘You are Minna, right?’ Bridget raised herself from the table.

‘Mrs Fru Minna,’ Minna said with emphasis to ensure the woman was aware of the calibre of woman she was talking to.

Albert rose and excused himself. For once, he looked at ease. He was probably relieved his woman was alive again so he could now live, Minna thought with scorn.

‘Yes Madam, I know you are Mrs. I know you very well but I don’t think you know me.’

‘Yes I do,’ said Minna with some vigour. ‘You once paid my taxi fare for me though the taxi left when I had just removed the money from my bag. Thanks anyway. Here is your money.’ Minna opened her purse. A new gift from Tetang.

‘No don’t bother. It was nothing.’

Minna pulled out a five hundred francs note. ‘Take it, I insist.’

‘I said don’t bother,’ said Bridget with more vigour. ‘It was for a good cause.’

Minna felt insulted. ‘It was not as if I couldn’t pay. My bag just disappointed me. That’s all. Take the money, please.’

‘Look, Madam. Put that money back into your purse. You are embarrassing me. People are looking and they will be thinking I am begging for money. I am not a poor woman, if you must know.’

‘I didn’t say so. I am just paying back a debt. I don’t see what is embarrassing about that.’

Bridget bit her lip. ‘You know what the passengers said about you?’

‘It’s not important and I don’t want to know.’ Minna’s voice was firm.

‘Talk to me with some respect. I am a responsible woman.’

Minna was stunned. Why was the woman being aggressive? ‘What has being responsible got to do with me?’

‘Everything. When you don’t respect people, they don’t respect you in turn and that can lead to war.’

Minna wanted to give the woman the best answer. Contemptuous silence. But she sensed that beneath the drunken tattle, there was some deeply founded hostility. ‘Look woman, if you think the paying of my fare gives you the authority to talk to me anyhow, forget it. I did not ask you to empty your bag for me. Here is the money which I am going to double.’

Minna pulled out a thousand francs. ‘I don’t think one mistake in my life should make me feel committed to the likes of you. I don’t know you, you don’t know me and I don’t

think I wish to know more than I already know.' Minna pushed the note towards the woman and looked away.

Bridget laughed. A very eerie one. 'Typical. Snobs. You think I don't know you? I know you very well. Think because you are educated and are living off your poor husband's money you can talk to me anyhow.'

'I earn a good salary woman which is well deserved. I don't need a man's money to survive, unlike you.'

'You are insulting me?' Bridget slapped a hand on her ponderous chest which she had heaved out. 'I have just started with you. By the time you get half of me, you shall be wishing your mouth was meant strictly for eating and not also for talking. It is the mouth that causes war. And you've caused one. Bitch.'

It was Minna's turn to laugh. Laughter aimed at concealing fear. 'I don't die by threats.'

'Then action you shall get. Idiot.' Bridget pushed her chair violently away and it hit Minna slightly on the shin. Minna pushed the chair away rising to defend herself if it came to it. But Bridget staggered away and disappeared in the crowd. Minna cursed quietly and sat down. Her whole body was shaking. Minna looked around and was happy people had been too busy enjoying themselves to bother about the altercation.

Bridget had not only been outright hostile but had actually promised her war. War for what? What had Minna done to that simpleton? Minna could swear that she had never known this woman anytime of her life before the taxi fiasco. What could she have done to provoke the ire of Bridget? Just jealousy? Who was Bridget for goodness sake? Was it just a strange coincidence having these close encounters with this strange woman? Minna had to find out for only thus would she be able to defend herself against any danger. Bridget had really meant business. Minna had seen it in her dreary eyes.

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When Tetang returned, Minna was sitting still though shaking her right leg. The evening had been spoilt for her. She narrated her ordeal to Tetang who was only to glad that they went back home. The absence of his clients had already soured his appetite for any further pleasure.

'Tee, am I a snob?'

The question hit Tetang unexpectedly as he steadied the car on the dark road. 'What do you mean?'

'Do I look low on people who are less educated and poorer than me?' Minna sounded as if she was about to cry.

'Why do you ask?'

'That's what people think I am. Starting from my mother, my sister and now Bridget.'

'And what do you think?'

Minna hesitated. 'I try to be a good person.'

'And that is what you are. A good person. A good mother and a good wife. Four healthy children out there know that and the man sitting by you knows that too. You worked very hard, burning the midnight candle to get your certificates. Others like Dorothy and Bridget had opportunities like you to have those certificates but they preferred the life of ease and bounty. And now when they see you reaping the rewards, they get jealous and call you a snob.'

Tetang slowed down behind a lousy transport van. 'Don't you even bother about them. There's nothing they can tell you. Not to talk of even judging you. Even now when you are earning a good salary, they don't work half as hard as you. They are ignoramuses. Lazy opportunists. You shouldn't even give a second thought to what they say about you. It is plain jealousy.'

'This Bridget really gives me the creeps and I really don't know where she is coming from. They way she spoke it was as if she knows me very well.'

'A con woman par excellence. They use the pretext of familiarity to get their way. Take

no notice of her. She is nothing but a free woman. Didn't you see her hanging loosely on the kerb as we were climbing up? I saw her. I am sure that Albert man just picked her from there and tried to present a neat front.'

Minna was somehow comforted but not completely at ease. 'But they were together at the club.'

'His steady pick then.'

'But this Bridget ...' Minna wanted to say more but did not know what. She was however convinced there was more to this Bridget than met the eye.

'Tee can you do something for me?'

'If it is legal.'

'Find out who this Bridget is?'

'Come on Min,' said Tetang with some annoyance. 'Bridget is a nobody. You don't have anything to do with the likes of her.'

'Tee, she is a somebody. It is not just a coincidence that she paid my taxi fare, joined us in the nightclub and probably stole our drinks, and now staggered her way round and round this very crowded restaurant just to sit with us. Three instances Tee. And she declared in no uncertain terms that she knew me. Con woman trick maybe, but why me?'

Tetang saw the logic of the argument and bit his lip in frustration. He did not need additional worries from Minna after the disappointment that still boiled in his stomach. He had wanted to converse with the men to ensure the deal had an unbreakable seal. And Minna could afford to be pestering him with trivial sentiments. 'Forget it Min and let's be thinking how the children are going to spend their one week holiday with their grandmother.'

'You mean you still want them to go despite our discussion?'

'You want your mother to say I am the one who has not only turned you away from her but also her grandchildren?'

'But I thought we agreed that we would convince her to come over if she really wants to see the children? The road is too bad, Tee. We can't afford to take the children to the village now. Remember Rogers has the GCE exams to prepare and Akwen has to go to the upper sixth. The second term holiday is critical preparation time.'

'The holiday is three weeks. They can break for one week. All work without play.'

'I am the teacher Tee, not you,' Minna cut in quickly.

'Your old man called me and I promised him the children were coming. Can't change that now.'

'Pa would understand. I'll convince him.'

'And make your father think I am not the man in my house?'

'This your patriarchal macho nonsense. That is why you want my children to suffer?'

Tetang slowed down the car. 'The way you talk is as if we are talking about some strange monsters. These are your parents for crying out loud. Don't make me think you are actually a snob, Min.'

'Stop it Tee. I am being realistic. The children can go during the long vacation after Akwen and Rogers must have written their exams.'

'Have you forgotten that Rogers and Rita would be going to Dimo for the long vacation? We promised my brother. I hope you don't want your people to say I want my children to visit only my own family and not yours?'

Minna raised her hands in surrender. 'You win even though your argument is rather skewed. Should those children not perform well in their exams, you will carry the blame. I swear and I shall be the one to throw it on you.' Minna quietly agreed that her husband as always was being realistic. He always had to be balanced on family issues. She had given her consent to Dimo's wish. How could she expect her husband to snub at his own in-laws?

‘There’s no convenient vehicle,’ said Tetang as he came out of the car that he had parked just at the entrance to the garage. ‘The ones I saw at the motor park, all the closed cabins were already booked. You surely don’t expect your children to sit in the open cabin.’ Minna and children had been waiting on the veranda since eight when Tetang left to arrange for a vehicle at the motor park. It was now close to midday.

‘Journey cancelled then,’ said Minna with a triumphant smile on her face. The first smile she had put on since morning. The Lord was on her side. It was a journey she had been dead set against in spite of a call two days earlier from Auntie Aggie insisting Ma was anxiously looking forward to welcoming her grandchildren. Besides the fact that Minna felt the sentiments expressed were false, she dreaded the road and the negative impact she still feared, was going to have on the children’s health and studies.

Minna did not believe her mother had sincere love for these children. Especially now that Dorothy’s child was with her. Minna was certain her mother would pay nothing but mechanical attention to her other grandchildren. There was also something more to her fear of this journey though she could not define it. But it was there, strong.

There was disappointment on the girls’ faces after Minna’s declaration. They all had been looking forward to this journey. Not their brother though. Rogers was about to have his first real girlfriend and he had wanted to use the holidays to consolidate the relationship. ‘I had dreamt this journey wasn’t a good one,’ he lied with glee, dragging his bag and those of his sisters back into the house.

‘God forbid,’ entered Rita with anger. ‘This journey is going to be a good one and it can’t be cancelled. I prayed and I know God is going to show us the way.’

‘Yes reverend and the way is into the house.’ Rogers was already down the corridor with the bags.

‘Come back here with those bags,’ scowled Tetang. He had thought of another plan. A risky one but he was going to execute it. Minna was going to kill him but he had made a solemn promise to his in-laws and could not risk rousing their ire against him. It was the price he had to pay for being an in-law. He understood his wife’s fears and motives for being against the journey. But he was the family head and had to make the hard decisions.

Rogers stopped and hesitated. ‘But Mami says it is cancelled now? Right Mami?’

‘That’s the only logical conclusion,’ said Minna glumly.

‘No Mami,’ cried Akwen. ‘We can sit in the open cabin without any problem. If others can sit there, then we also can. We are as human as they are.’

‘I agree with sister Akwen,’ said Tiffuh with a pompous voice. ‘I can even stand and hold the bars of the Land Rover.’

‘Why not my brave daughters?’ Tetang went back into the car and turned it into the take-off position. ‘Bring the bags here,’ he scolded again at Rogers who obeyed though frowning. Tetang stuffed the bags in the boot while Minna and her son looked on in despair. The girls however were giggling in victory.

‘What then do you intend to do?’ asked Minna still hoping all the hard work would end up with the journey being cancelled.

‘Beg my boss to give me the official four-wheel pick-up and the office driver.’ He was aware Minna was going to blow her top off should he just mention that he was going to drive himself. He had never done the road by himself but he was an experienced driver. He however had to demonstrate to his wife that he was accommodating her worries as best as he could and one of these was getting a vehicle with a professional driver. The boss had told him he was going to use the vehicle but Tetang had to go all the same, partly with the hope that his boss might have changed his plans and also to demonstrate to Minna he had done all he could to meet her wishes at least halfway. That would make it easier for her to

compromise.

'Then why not just call him?'

'Let us just go there so he should see how desperate we are.' Tetang's real aim was that moving away from the house meant setting a momentum for the journey.

Minna made a snort. 'I am going to tell him we are not desperate and that this journey is of no major importance.'

'Just open your mouth and I will call someone to tell Ma you refused that the children should not come.'

'I will call too and repeat what Pa has said,' Akwen added her own voice much to Tetang's pleasure.

'Okay you people have won,' said Minna raising her hands and pinching the lobe of her ear. 'I don't want anybody to come complaining to me they are not well or that they failed their exams.'

'Can I stay back then?' begged Rogers.

'So that you can bring a girl to this house?' That was pompous Akwen

'What?' Minna and Tetang quipped in unison, piercing eyes falling on their son.

Rogers tongue remained stuck on his palate. Their parents were very vocal about keeping amorous relations for much later; when they could afford on their own to keep lovers. 'She's just trying to make trouble.' He managed to mutter just to keep the eyes of his parents off him. It paid off and he threw venomous eyes at his sister. Akwen was the only other person who knew of his secret. Akwen shrugged her shoulders and went after her sisters into the car. She had made for herself an enemy.

This time around, Tetang ensured all the doors and gate were properly locked before setting the car down the road. He was anxious but he dared not expose his real plans now. Minna had a way of making him change his mind especially when she could discern he did not have full conviction of a proposed venture.

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Tetang's boss had indeed gone out with the pick-up as Tetang had earlier been informed. That was what the gateman told them. Tetang eyed his wife with some anxiety and hated the smirk on her face. Not too fast, he said in his heart. He still had the challenging option. A desperate one, which he had never attempted before. But there was a first for everything.

Minna sat mute, her anxiety rising as she wondered what was in her husband's mind as he throttled away in the direction of the motor park. The last thought in her mind was what was in actual fact being manifested as Tetang fired the car passed the park without the slightest hesitation. 'No?' she screamed. 'What do you think you are doing?' She turned her face towards her husband, from the other front seat.

Tetang did not respond but even pressed harder on the accelerator.

'You can't do this Tee and you know it. You have never driven this car before to Widikum. You can't be dreaming of taking the risk. This is all the family you have, Tee. Stop this madness.' She had the urge to seize him by the hand but just remembered it could be a fatal move. The speed dial was swinging between eighty and one hundred. It was not the first time she had experienced this speed with him behind the wheel but the fear in her mind magnified the speed to dangerous levels. 'If you don't want to stop at least slow down. You want to kill us.' There was defeat in her voice though with a hint of a spartan's spirit

'Don't talk when the driver is driving,' Akwen reminded her mother of her own usual warning.

Minna turned around in anger. The girls looked away but had mock smiles on their faces. Rogers who was sitting directly behind his mother had closed his eyes in indifference and trying to live the plans he had made for himself in his mind. Minna wanted to scold at Akwen but the breath was cut out of her by Rita.

'Pa if this is the journey that has begun, let us stop and pray first.'

That sapped Minna's anger and made her feel guilty. Her daughter's proposal was too powerful to ignore though she would have wished not to have divine intervention at a time when she was aching to blow her top off. Tetang slowed down the vehicle and gradually brought it to a stop.

Both adults had realised they needed to invoke the grace of the supreme to cast away their fears and beg for journey mercies. With both of them not being fully convinced about Tetang's proficiency to handle the trip, they had no other choice but to lean on their omnipotent divinity for a safe drive. Rita said the first prayer, which was a brief one-liner and Minna concluded with a long, winding entreaty.

Still not satisfied with the prayer, Minna attempted one last desperate attempt to get her husband think again. 'Why are you making such a deadly experiment with your own family? Made a bet or something? Yes, let the children go to the village but we should get a proper vehicle.'

'I thought you just prayed for journey mercies?'

'Don't try to evade the issue. Let's get another vehicle for goodness sake.'

'All right, if that is what you want,' said Tetang calmly. 'In Bali or Batibo, we'll look for public transport and I'll park this car in some friend's compound.'

'What if there is no vehicle? We shouldn't take the risk. Besides, it is well past one and we risk reaching very late. We can't travel with children when it's very late. Let's just go back and make better arrangements for tomorrow. I will make the arrangements myself.'

Tetang made a mirthless laugh. He was not going to turn back now. 'Okay, the road is tarred right to Batibo. If in Batibo there is no good vehicle, we can turn back and tell ourselves we went out for sight-seeing.' Tetang made a disingenuous smile as he turned and looked at the children. The girls winked and nodded in approval. Rogers was sulking and looking away through the wound-up glass of the door by which he sat.

Minna was not convinced. 'Why don't I believe you?'

'On my honour.' Tetang raised his hand like a good scout. But he didn't intend to respect his pledge.

There was relative peace and quiet as Tetang slaughtered speed over the newly surfaced road. The car was old but not that bad for the rev of the engine still gave a smooth, muffled hum, which was typical of a car in good form. Sturdy elephant grass, swamps of raffia palm and neat brown fields of young corn zoomed past as Tetang was determined to prove that he was the man and commandant of his battalion, and had the strength and courage to lead the troops to conquer.

At Bali, Minna did not want to rely solely on Tetang to look for the proper vehicle. She guessed he was playing some game so he could drive by himself all the way to Widikum. She wished she had not talked to him too harshly for she realised, and very late that what she had succeeded in doing was challenging him to prove he could be a man. No man worth his salt was going to allow his woman's voice deter him from proving he was a hero. It was too late now to take that back. The best she could do was finding the public transport herself for him not to take the risk of driving by himself. She looked and looked but unfortunately, there was no convenient vehicle.

When they got to Batibo, they got a similar story. No vehicle ready to move. However, one driver told them rather loudly that even ordinary cars could now drive to Widikum for the council had worked on the road. Minna did not want to believe it and responded rudely to drive the pompous driver away. She came out of her shell of caution and spoke out strongly against Tetang's wish to drive by himself. Nothing Tetang said could appease her. So vociferous was her opposition that Tetang abandoned her as they stood by the car and entered a bar. He asked for a beer which was not available and decided to move to another bar.

Outside, Tetang saw Samson, a popular driver on this road walking towards Minna. Samson had just stepped out of his Land Rover which was standing pile high with goods from Widikum. Tetang rushed quickly to meet him before Minna. He knew Minna could



poison Samson's mind to tell some frightening story about the road and that could further discourage Tetang whose courage about driving himself was already on the wane.

'How's the road Samson,' asked Tetang winking an eye and brandishing a brief thumb-up sign before Minna could even realise Samson's presence.

'Super,' replied Samson, taking off his cap to shake Tetang's hands.

'What do you mean by super,' asked Minna frowning and taking Samson's hand grudgingly.

'Dis your car will reach Widikum like a plane.' Samson wiped his face revealing a whiff of guilt but Minna did not notice.

Samson had however played the game well for Tetang to make up his mind. He left Minna to chat more with Samson about the family in Widikum and went to meet a long lost friend who had just emerged from a provision store. The friend dragged him into a spot for the best of Batibo hospitality. A cup of *fitchuk*, Batibo's renowned brand of palm wine. Tetang really needed this to warm himself up in preparation for the journey ahead and to be able to receive the pounding that would inevitably pour from his wife. Minna turned down the offer for a drink preferring to stay in the car with the children.

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Everyone seemed tired and fed up when Tetang finally settled behind the wheel. They all watched quietly as he smacked his lips to steel himself up for the drive. He swung the car on the highway in the direction of Widikum. Minna raised the alarm as Tetang expected but he consciously blocked his ears and focussed his attention on the road ahead. Minna cursed and blasted, forgetting that the children were in the car but Tetang drove on.

And true to the information, the road was not that bad but only up to some five kilometres after the end of tarred road from Batibo. The rest of the road was as rugged and tedious as it had ever been. Boulders right in the centre of the road, pools of mud after every bend and some of them very deep, bends with angles asymptotic to zero and ditches across the roads cut out by runoffs. Tetang almost wished he had listened to Minna.

He managed to steer the car with some dexterity though it kept jerking its occupants in every direction until at one bend, the vehicle came to an abrupt halt, flinging everyone forward. Rita hit her head against the hand-break lever that was between the front seats and erupted in a sharp cry. Rogers had his nose flattened against the back of his mother's seat while Akwen was thrown to the floor. Minna managed to save her face by hitting her hand against the windscreen, which did not break. Only Tetang and Tiffuh scraped by unscathed.

Tetang pumped hard on throttle but the car only roared and stayed in place. Minna opened the door and wanted to jump out. But when her feet touched mud, she pulled it back. Tetang set the gear in reverse and throttled again but no movement. He opened his own door and discovered the car was deep in mud. He sighed and slapped his hands against the sides of his laps.

'What have you seen?' mocked Minna with a snarl. 'Champion driver.'

Tetang knew more was going to follow but was not prepared for it. He decided and stepped out of the car. He was shivering inside. The mud went as far as the knee and he managed and squelched his way to solid dry land. The vegetation here was a transition between upland savannah with intermittent forest from the Batibo end, making way for intensive tree cover that swept down steep slopes towards Widikum.

'I said this was not a good journey.' Tetang heard his son say.

'Keep quiet and come out here and help me.'

'The mud on my own side is too deep,' said Rogers opening his door only slightly.

'Will you come out here before I send you deeper than the mud?'

Rogers obeyed, grumbling as his nice shoes disappeared into filthy mud.

'Get me a spade from the boot,' ordered Tetang standing on safe dry ground with his hands on his waist.

Rogers eyed him with anger. How was he supposed to get to the boot with all the mud?

It was not his fault that the car had got stuck. But how could he protest when it was clear his old man was not prepared for any compromise?

As Rogers set about opening the boot, his father ordered him to stop for he had heard the vibrations of another vehicle. The driver and passengers who probably had more experience on the road might help.

Tetang was happy when out of the bend emerged a truck carrying market people and drums of palm oil. The driver stopped the truck and all the men descended. The truck driver got in behind the wheel of Tetang's car and with the combined force of the men, the car was hauled out of the mud. Tetang thanked them and offered two thousand francs in compensation. Before leaving, the driver advised Tetang to reduce his speed. Tetang took the advice seriously and worked as hard as he could to steer clear off mud. Minna folded her hands across her chest and sulked for most of the time as the car hobbled down the steep, winding, rough road.

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It was past protest time. Minna took Tiffuh to sit with her at the front even though she was fed up, tired and tense. Tiffuh's injured head needed some maternal massage. Minna tried to mumble some personal prayer but her heart was shaking too much to give her peace. The heart had even jumped to the bottom of her throat and stayed there.

The stick-up on the road, she was afraid could be a pointer to a much worse incident yet to come. Her husband was not used to driving on such bad roads by himself. How could this give her any confidence? Sticking the car in mud was clear evidence of a haughty novice. Voicing out any further negative fears however, she was scared might translate into fatal reality.

What more could she do than stay quiet. Turning back now was no good either for they had already gone more than half the distance. She crossed the fingers of both hands as a hopeful substitute to prayers. Widikum suddenly felt like it was farther than the end of the world. How could she find peace under the circumstances? She could only ease up when the car would have landed in Widikum.

Tetang started humming a song when he felt the tension and quietness in the car was too much. They were not weary pilgrims travelling to some far away land.

*'Swing lo  
sweet chariots...*

He sang alone for quite a while before Rita who had just waken up from sleep joined him. Rita even animated it by clapping her hands and doing the solo. Before long, everyone was into the song, except Minna who was still seething at her husband's recklessness.

Rogers, who had been cursing the mud that had now caked over his feet, began to hum but stopped shortly after. He was too angry to sing. His precious shoes, which he had thrown into the boot, were already a write off. Shoes he used to lie to his friends he had bought for twenty thousand.

When the song ended, nobody seemed to have more stock of inspiration to tune another one. Not even Rita. The incessant jerks had battered her muscles to porridge. Silence once again reigned as everyone said secret prayers for the journey to come to a quick end.

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Tiffuh sneaked back to meet her brother and sisters at the back. This unleashed some of the tension in Minna. Minna had actually started having those pins and needles on her legs as a consequence of carrying her last daughter on her knees.

Minna desperately wanted to feel at ease and be happy for her children, especially the girls who were really excited about going to the village. She was supposed to be the one to whip up their expectations with interesting stories about living and growing up in her

village. But here she was, making it seem she was leading them to be crucified.

Why could she not chill? It certainly could not only be because of the fear of an accident or her children's examination prospects. It certainly was not just about her husband's obstinacy or the prospect of yet again meeting a mother who despised her. She dug deeper into her mind to find out whether there was some more profound but hidden reason behind this consuming fear she had. The fear was irrational and she knew her husband was not taking her seriously because of this. Help me Lord, she begged quietly as the car chugged on, whipping the steam out of its human cargo.

'I had a very bad dream last night,' Rogers' solemn voice broke through the silence.

Tetang thought it would be a nice distraction. Rogers had the knack to make them laugh. But this time around, it was no laughing matter. He was in the first place a deeply disappointed boy.

'So what was the dream about,' enquired Tiffuh, keen for some exciting diversion.

'I had forgotten about the dream and it really made me sweat. Maybe it was because of this dream that I didn't like this journey.'

'That is a lie,' said Akwen with passion.

'Over sabi,' Rogers cursed his sister. 'Are you in my heart?'

'Enough of that,' scolded Tetang. The last thing he needed was a quarrel between his oldest children. 'Tell us the dream.'

Rogers cleared his throat. 'That grandma, grandpa, Auntie Dorothy and everybody in the compound came to visit us in Bamenda. They came all the way from Widikum on foot and carrying with them a small coffin.'

'For a baby?' interrupted Tiffuh. There was terror on her face.

'Just hold on.' Rogers went on. 'Immediately they entered our house, they put the coffin at the centre of the parlour, on the floor and started crying. Everybody crying except grandma. We came out of our rooms frightened, not knowing what was going on.'

'I don't like this dream.' That was Tiffuh again closing her ears. She feared death and anything to do with it.'

'It's just a dream my girl,' said Minna to the surprise of everyone. She had suddenly found her voice useful again. The truth was she needed the distraction too and she hoped to use the occasion to make peace with her children.

'Grandpa asked me to come and call for you. The radio was very loud in your room and you people could not hear when I knocked. I opened the door which was not keyed and entered. You were both deep asleep. I woke you up and said what grandpa had said. I also told you about all the people who had come and about the coffin. Mami just started crying and saying that she knew that they were going to kill her.'

'Kill who?' quipped Akwen, like an engrossed eavesdropper.

'Mami did not call any name but kept saying they were going to kill her. So you Mami and Papa came out. When you people entered the parlour, everybody stopped crying except Mami.'

'Me alone?' said Minna, frowning.

'Yes,' replied Rogers, raising his voice. 'And alone, you walked towards the coffin slowly and still crying. Everybody opened the way for you. You touched the top of the coffin and realised the lid was not nailed. You pushed the top away and everyone rushed towards the coffin and struggled to see inside.'

'Who was inside?' entered Akwen in a tense whisper.

Rogers hesitated. He was finding it difficult to call the name.

'Baby Ngam?' breathed Rita

Rogers shook his head.

'Then who?' said Minna turning her face around. It seemed a chilling dream after all and suddenly the dreams she had been having, came to the fore of her memory. And she could remember they had not been pleasant dreams.

'Leave the boy alone,' said Tetang. 'Hope we are not forgetting that this is just a dream.'

'This is not a simple dream, Tee. I have been having somewhat similar dreams for the past week, all centred around deaths and coffins though the corpses are people I don't know. But by the time I get up, I forget the dreams.

'I also forgot my own dream in the morning. I think that was because we were busy preparing for this journey. The corpse in my own dream however, I could recognise. But it scares me to say it.' There was real fear in Rogers' voice.

Minna wanted to ask whether it was any of them in the car. If that was the case, then this journey was supposed to be the killing ground. And she would force Tetang to stop the car. And what would happen? They making the rest of the journey on foot under dark forest cover and frightening streams all along the way?

Rogers tended to have dreams that predicted some truth. Minna could remember that when her grandfather died, Rogers dreamt about it. There was also the time when Rogers dreamt that Akwen was selected to carry ten flags to lead the whole school in the march past during the National Youth Day. Two days later, it was announced over the radio that Akwen passed in ten ordinary level subjects.

'Who was in the coffin?' Minna asked again, cocking her ear to let every word and accent sink straight into her brains. She was really taking the dream serious.

'Auntie Dorothy twisted in a u-shape to fit the coffin.'

Minna exclaimed briefly and turned her face away. Her daughters did same. 'That was a very bad dream,' said Minna folding her arms and feeling a cold wave rise up her body. She felt the sensations of a shiver. The omens were not good. No, her sister could not die. She hated her sister's ways but still loved her.

'Ma I am scared,' said Tiffuh squeezing her way back to the front to join her mother. Minna did not utter a word. She was too busy contemplating her own fears.

'It's nothing,' said Tetang, laughing in an attempt to bolster his last daughter's courage.

'It's not nothing,' protested Minna softly, tightening her arms around Tiffuh. Everyone behind was quiet, each tending their fears and worries as best as they could.

'Get serious all of you. This is just a dream and you make as if it's something that happened? What have you people become. Superstitious cavemen? I thought you were all bible believers.'

'But Pa, the bible has a lot to say about dreams.' That was Rita in a firm voice.

'I forgot we had a pastor in the car. The dream means nothing.'

'Don't delude yourself Tee,' said Minna. 'You know deep in your heart that this dream can really mean something serious. Say it, Tee. We all know dreams don't come from nothing.'

'I can see you are the one promoting this nonsense. Why not pull your children away from their schools and send them to study witchcraft under the shrine of some medicine man inhabiting the forest in isolation.'

'Don't trivialise the topic mister. If you don't want to admit the issue is part of our lives, then stay quiet.' Minna's aggression was coming not just from the prevailing discussion and Tetang knew it. He just kept quiet. He had won the battle. They were just a couple of metres out of their destination. No need to be gleeful now. No need to add more salt to a throbbing wound.

It was not quite late when they broke out of the forest cover and into the open, flat bottom of a geological bowl that bore the old centre of Widikum. Dusk was just settling in though it was close to seven. Longer days. Tetang stopped the car to ease his bladder by the roadside. Minna and the children also came out of the car to stretch out their bodies and savour the success of having arrived safely.

The river Momo flowed here in dark, smooth tranquillity, licking delicately at its rocky banks under the cover of the occasional tree. The air was tropically hot and moist, almost suffocating especially for the children, more used to the dry, cold air of the Bamenda highlands.

This was the commencement of the equatorial forest as could be seen from the dense monolithic silhouette of palm trees that swept over the slopes, to the enveloping mountain that carved out a greying sky from a territory that was the cradle of some major tribes. There was a permanent aroma of palm nuts on the boil in the air, proclaiming to any guest the key to life Widikum style. Widikum was a major producer of palm oil and the reputation of its oil stretched to remote parts of the country.

Minna had thought that by the time her feet touched the soil of her hometown, the tension in her would take flight. It did. Just a bit. The inexplicable fear still prevailed in her. Rogers dream stayed prominent in her mind. She felt as if she was hanging on some thin thread and about to fall. They had arrived safely for goodness sake and the children were in one good piece and excited. Why could the mirth not transfer into her? She inhaled deeply but the warm, humid air did not inspire her to continue to stand outside to mope at the quiet river.

‘Well done,’ she said to her husband as they all stepped back into the car. Maybe accentuating the positive could imbue in her some good feelings. Her husband had proved his point and she just had to doff her hat to him though at the back of her mind she still wished he had not taken the risk.

The compliment sounded hollow but Tetang took it in good faith. He nodded with a triumphant smile slashing across his face. He steered the car through the rather hectic, old town centre that was struggling to catch up with time. Old, dilapidating timber shacks held their own side by side with emerging blockhouses, all accommodating small provision stores, drinking spots and eating-houses. A couple of women roasted plantains and fish in the open while others sold groundnuts and bush meat in trays and bowls. Men were already trooping into the drinking joints to guzzle beer or the local palm wine.

Minna’s heart thumped faster as the car glided closer to their compound. ‘Do you think something bad could have happened?’ she opened the question in her heart in a whisper to her husband. She did not want the children to hear.

‘Death?’ he said as if joking.

Minna nodded.

Tetang resolved his wife was in no mood for any joke. He spoke more seriously. ‘We should have seen the signs.’ He pressed his lips, shrugging his shoulders. ‘Such things never hide in a small place like this. We should have seen some palm decorations. Things like that. We have arrived anyway. Let’s find out.’

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There was nothing significant taking place in the compound besides people returning from the farms. Women with their baskets on their tired backs with support ropes that went round their heads; men with cutlasses and children carrying freshly harvested bunches of plantains or bundles of firewood.

They were surprised to see the strange car drive in, flashing its headlamps as if announcing some grand concert. They dropped their loads down and watched on with keen attention as the vehicle came to stop right in the middle of the compound. It was quite a while since a vehicle last entered that deep into the compound. There was electricity in the compound now. Minna thanked God for that.

It was the shriek of joy from Auntie Aggie that made everyone rush towards the car. They literally seized all the occupants of the car out to embrace them and give them a real warm Widikum welcome. Even the patriarch of the compound, old and frail rushed out with limping strides to hail his first child and her family. It was a great honour they were paying him, bringing home all his grandchildren and his first son-in-law.

The old man ordered that the guest move straight into his house first and be properly received before other arrangements could be made. That was his right. His house was almost at the centre and one did not need any imagination to decipher that here resided the central nervous system of a compound of six houses that accommodated children, cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters and a couple of in-laws.

Though her father's salary when he was a postal worker was nothing as compared to prevailing standards, he did manage wisely to set up a comfortable compound where he was going to retire to. Each of his wives had an independent house big enough to accommodate their needs. One he had built purposely for his now late parents. This he had rehabilitated and together with the two other houses, lodged other family members and guests.

Minna sat with her family in the sitting room while her father and the others went out to look for something for the guests. It was a long time ago that she sat in this room and the unforgettable smell of the modest furniture took her back to the time when she was still a girl.

Four colonial cushion chairs with sturdy curved arms, a bean shaped central table with three pointed legs and an ancient cane cupboard that was standing strong despite the evidence of over-age. 'Do you throw away an old man because he is old?' the old man used to question anyone who dared to suggest that he got rid of the cupboard.

Minna used to polish the furniture and her father would reward her with sweets and puff-puff. Rare treats in those days. Those precious days when nothing ever bothered her besides having her daily food. Here she was, having to cope with her own family, her mother, her sister, her job and growing older. And there was no place to hide from all these exalting challenges. How she wished she could go back to being a carefree girl once more.

It was only now that Minna understood the value of the ancient furniture. A great sentimental value, which could not be priced. It was the very sentiments that caught her. Sentiments of a glorious past. This was her home from when she became conscious of living. She had grown up between this compound and many stations to which her father had been posted when he was still an active worker. It was in this place that her husband and his relatives had come to pay her bride price.

Minna could remember the distant farms she used to accompany her mother to. She could remember mashing palm nuts with her feet to produce oil. She could recall cracking kernels and selling them to make small pocket money. She could see herself once again the little girl who used to frolic about in the palm forest and coffee thickets, playing hide and seek with her friends. Her father used to call her Big Mami for he had named her after his grandmother. The old man used to pet her and would scold at anybody who dared to beat her. Even her mother.

If her father had not been a wise man, she would never have even gone beyond secondary school. Many people had wanted her to get sucked into the home of some rich polygamous tycoon but her father had put his foot down. Here she was, a successful teacher and proud mother. And here was the place and resided the people who made her. She was supposed to be at ease and excited coming here. Not feeling that way was akin to being disloyal and ungrateful.

Yes she was happy seeing her father alive and thankful for the honour of him receiving her and her family. She was grateful for the honour of being in a position to pay back for all the care he had given in her upbringing. However, she still could not find it in her mind to forgive him for having married a second wife just at the moment when he was about to go on retirement. For Minna, it was like her father had taken a death wish for she could not understand how he was going to take care of a new set of children and a much younger wife on his meagre pension.

Minna had had a bitter exchange with him on the issue and he had almost cursed her. That was the point when her relationship with her father became strained, almost permanently. And now as she sat in the old man's parlour, trying to be nostalgic, at the back of her mind, she knew that all that her father was engaged in was role-playing and not based on genuine filial love.

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Minna was beaten out of her thoughts by a sudden commotion from her children. They had all got up and rushed excitedly towards the door. Their grandmother had appeared and in her arms, Ngam. The child Minna never wanted. The guilt hit Minna like a hammer. Akwen was the first on the child whom she seized and ran out of the house with. The others followed but for Rogers who was beginning to develop his father's bad habit of hiding sentiments.

Minna rose and grabbed her mother with all warmth. Why had she been afraid to see her? The physical presence of her mother reminded her of nothing but affection, care and love all given unconditionally. That was what Ma used to give her and how could she forget it? Her mother held her firmly too and that was message enough to Minna that Ma cherished her daughter. Nobody could break the bond between her and her mother. It was a given. Minna kissed her mother on the cheek and held her at shoulder length to see her properly.

'What have you been doing to put on all this good flesh?' said Minna genuinely surprised with the healthy look of her mother. The last time her mother was looking like one of those mummies, she had watched on television. All skin and bones. Now her face was smoother, her jaws were full and a proud bottom she used to have seemed to be popping out again.

'It's harvest season now,' said the old woman shaking the bottom. 'I have gallons of palm oil and my pockets are full. I now eat like a tycoon.'

'Na wah oh Ma and you couldn't even send my own.'

'You modern women don't like palm oil. You say you want to remain thin like bamboo poles. Want me to send you something that would poison you?' Minna's heart sank. Ma could not wait to kick her in the shins. Minna shook her head in despair as Ma left to embrace her son-in-law. 'If you didn't come with my children this holiday I would have sent police after you. Thanks for bringing them.'

Tetang eyed his wife and could see the despair on her face. He immediately knew his mother-in-law was the cause. 'But don't blame me when they start worrying you.'

'What more do I need now in life than grandchildren to worry me?'

'How's Ngam doing Ma?' asked Tetang. Minna turned her face away. She wished he had not asked about Ngam for she feared the effect it could have on Ma. Minna was having a rare positive moment with her mother, even if a tainted one and did not want it spoilt completely. With Dorothy's shadow about, nothing else was going to matter to Ma.

Auntie Aggie soon entered with a large bowl of food, which she set on the central table. 'Ngam is the blessing we needed,' she said, interrupting her older sister who was yet to respond. 'Ngam has changed your mother's life. He was just what she needed to realise that she had to live. She owed it a duty to Ngam to live. Suddenly, Ma is no longer negative. She hardly threatens again. Does not abuse anyone. Not even me. I used to carry bag loads of



curses everyday but can you believe that Ma can really tell me “you are tired, go to bed”. Before, she would call me a lazy dog.’

Auntie Aggie stopped talking when she heard the footsteps of her sister’s husband. As a guest in the compound, she had to mind her tongue. ‘We will talk later,’ she whispered to Minna and jumped out of the house.

Minna was excited with the revelation and felt like following her aunt to hear more. Not about Ngam though but about her mother’s condition. There was still time. They had a full week to spend in the village. She would not only hear but also see for herself. For now, she had to bask in her father’s hospitality.

Food came from all the houses. Food that had been cooked earlier in the morning to serve for supper was all brought to the patriarch’s house. Minna flinched when her mother’s mate entered with her own dish. The woman still looked so young and ravishing. She was the reason why Pa had kept Ma aside. Minna had a rusty relation with the woman. Politeness and skin deep affection and the feeling was mutual.

Everyone came into Pa’s house after they had cleaned up and changed. This was what Pa liked. Every member of his family sitting around him, eating and feasting together. They were close to thirty people in the house. He brought out a jug of red wine and a special calabash of palm wine. He poured out some of the palm wine on the threshold making a special libation that involved invoking all his forebears to drink and continue to watch over the family.

Later, drums rolled, hands clapped and feet pounded on the ground as songs were intoned and everyone sang with enthusiasm. Even Minna who had stayed inhibited by her fears and thoughts got up and shook her body with some style. She could not resist for long the overwhelming tide of joy that had swept the compound.

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As the days went by, Minna found herself more at ease and actually began enjoying her stay. She actually could not understand why she had been scared in the first place. Everything fell into its proper place. The children were happy playing around and visiting other relatives. They swam in the river and even learnt how to catch fish with hooks.

Tetang had hours of relaxing conversation with his father-in-law, sampling palm wine, attending some local meetings where he even discovered some business opportunity. The community had contributed some money for construction of sheds in the market and were looking for someone to design and build the sheds. With the support of his in-law, Tetang did put in his application.

Minna did not have anything to worry about. All the cooking and cleaning were in the hands of her aunt and all she had to do was eat, sleep and gossip. She even had inspiring conversations with her father and gradually began to discover that her mother’s mate was not all the devil she had held all along. Everyday, she was sure to have some special dish from the woman. The woman even shocked her one morning by offering her a large tin of palm oil. What then did she have to be scared of?

There was no death as had been in the dreams. Ngam was indeed happy and did not cry as he used to do in Bamenda. Ma was at ease with Ngam and the child indeed did keep her alive. Ma and Ngam were like two old lovers. Minna did not hear a single swear word from Ma but rather compliments about how she had well-behaved and hardworking children.

Minna only wished that this could last forever. Her family was coming back to being the reliable shoulders on which she could lean. The presence of Dorothy and her brother however was needed to make the whole circle round. Maybe in good time, Minna prayed.

One morning, Minna did not like the look on her mother’s face. The old woman looked worried. She refused to eat and instead grabbed her hoe to go to the farm. Going to the farm was not what Ma had programmed the previous day. Minna just knew her mother was going to the farm to brood over what was bugging her. Minna took a hoe and followed her later on.

When Minna got to the farm, her mother was sitting under a tree, her back leaning against the trunk. Ma did not even notice someone was around until Minna touched her.

‘Don’t do that,’ cried the older woman, holding her chest.

‘Sorry Ma,’ said Minna lowering herself down by her mother. ‘You haven’t done any work yet.’

‘I have planted some corn,’ Ma lied but Minna could not disprove that.

‘If you are tired why not just go home.’

‘And what shall we eat next season?’

‘It’s not as if you are going to starve Ma if you don’t plant this corn. Where’s the corn? Let me go and plant for you.’

‘It’s finished. After resting a bit, I will go back and remove weeds from under the cassava.’

‘Ma, just go back and rest. I will do it for you.’

‘You want to break your waist so Mr Tetang would come and accuse me. I beg oh, leave am for me.’

Minna ignored her mother and set about removing the weeds with her hoe. She knew something was boiling inside the old woman but did not know how to get it out from her. Minna did not trust herself to ask the right question.

‘Minna,’ said her mother with a rather hesitant voice.

Minna dropped her hoe and rushed back towards her mother with some alacrity.

‘Why don’t you go and bring me your sister?’

Minna made as if she had not heard well. ‘My sister?’ said she, hitting her chest.

‘The only one you have. I really need to see her to talk to her. I feel that this time around if I talk to her, she will change.’

Minna folded her arms across her chest and placed a hand over her mouth in reflection. When will Ma ever stop this mad obsession about a daughter who did not care about anybody, least of all, a mother who will die for her. ‘What makes you think that Ma?’

‘Mother’s instinct. She is suffering somewhere very badly. I can feel it. You have to help her Minna. She is your only sister. You can’t let her die.’

Minna did not know whether to be angry or sympathetic. Dorothy again? Just when she thought she was connecting with her mother like it used to be, comes the ghost of Dorothy again to break it? ‘Ma, if Dorothy is not fine, we would hear. She knows how she can reach any of us. She just doesn’t care.’

‘Don’t talk like that Minna. I am a mother and whatever my child turns out to be, I can’t turn my back on her. I still have to care about her. I know as a mother too, you feel the same.’

Minna understood; the painful truth. But this was not the moment to worry about Dorothy. ‘When we go back to Bamenda I will look for her.’

‘That may be too long now Minna. I need to see her immediately. Call some people over the phone and they may lead you to her. I can tell you who you can call.’

Minna suspected her mother knew more than she was telling. ‘Ma, what is it that makes it so urgent for you to see her only now? What is really the matter, Ma?’

Ma shook her head, pressing her lips together. Minna wanted to tickle her mother further to convince herself her mother was not up to some mischief. ‘Ma, if you know where she is, why not just tell me and I’ll send for her?’

‘I know where she is?’ Ma said in fury. ‘Why would I be asking you to look for her? What do you take me for? A trickster?’ Ma bowed her head and shook it. ‘Minna please help me.’ The woman began to cry.

Minna felt guilty and wanted to rush and embrace her mother and apologise. But the urge to understand this urgent need in Ma held her back. She just had to understand what was going on. Why did Ma want to see Dorothy this urgently? ‘Ma, is it that you want her to take Ngam back?’

The old woman did not raise her head. She instead gathered herself after a while and got up. 'If you don't want to do as I am begging, then I'll go and beg some other person. You are very stone-hearted.' Ma began to move.

Minna was not going to take it lying down this time. She had had enough of the insults. 'I am not stone-hearted Ma. You are the one who is stone-hearted Ma. You keep things to yourself. And when it concerns Dorothy, the world can go to hell.'

'You are very selfish.'

'And you Ma are inconsiderate.'

'If you were not my daughter, I would have long washed off my hands.'

No, Minna was not going to allow her mother to continue to demonise her without talking back. 'Ma this is the kind of attitude that forced Pa to marry another woman.'

Ma spun around as if she had been bitten by a snake. 'What did you say? Me your mother? You support your father the cheat? One who was cheating on me all his life? You have the audacity to talk to me? I who slaved under hot sun and ate every dirt that you should live well? I swallowed all the abuse and lived with your father just so you can grow comfortably and you have the spine to insult me?' Ma increased the volume of her voice and walked away.

Minna ran after her and held her by the hand. 'I am sorry Ma. I don't know what came over me. I am truly sorry.' Ma wanted to force her way on but Minna held fast, going down on her knees and gathering herself around her mother's legs. Minna began to cry too and her mother placed a hand on her hair.

Auntie Aggie emerged from the compound surprised to see the sad posture of her sister and niece. She wanted to go closer and find out more but thought better of it. It was not her place. Mother and daughter were in an intimate union probably of reconciliation and peacemaking. Her presence might only spoil the moment. Whatever could have caused them to fight, she wondered. She sighed and ran back to the compound.

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Minna narrated the fight to her husband later the following morning. He told her what he had always thought about their incessant fights. 'Your mother loves you and actually looks up to you. She is proud of your achievements. You are the one who makes her raise her face in this compound. Her mate cannot compare with her because of you.' They were in the special guest room in Pa's house where Pa had insisted they be lodged.

'Then why does she keep picking on me especially when it has to do with Dorothy?' asked Minna pressing her head on her husband's chest. 'She likes Dorothy more than me and regrets the fact that I am the more successful sister.'

'No no, darling. You don't understand your mother. You have to try and understand where she is coming from. Every caring mother does not like to see any of her children deprived. She thinks that the successful ones have the responsibility of raising the others and that is why she keeps putting pressure on you to help Dorothy. If she did not have regard for you, she would not be placing this responsibility on you. She loves you Min. Look at it this way.'

Minna kept quiet understanding the logic of her husband's declarations. It actually made her feel good although she had a strong feeling he was only trying to console her. 'I think you are right,' she admitted non-committally, kissing him.'

'I always am. I must admit, I have really enjoyed myself.'

'Me too,' said Minna with some guilt and feeling her muscles shrink out of tension. She had been against the whole trip. 'But you know, the quarrel I had with Ma almost spoilt it. Thank God we made up. Though I am not fully convinced her mind is at peace. I suspect that if she doesn't see Dorothy very soon, something bad might happen.'

'Bad like what?'

'I don't know. Maybe provoke another fight.'

'I hope not. Well, it is between mother and daughter. Immediately I get up from this bed, I am going with my father-in-law to meet the committee in-charge of the market sheds project.'

'That's being selfish.'

'Making money for you and your children?'

'Get away and hold me.' She kissed him again. 'I wish I could make total peace with my mother.' She said pulling away from him in one moment of reflection. 'What's that noise?'

'What noise but your voice?'

'Like someone crying?' Minna raised herself from the bed and listened.

'Yes someone is crying and it is like more than one person.' Tetang heard this time too and also rose from the bed.

The crying came on louder and louder and it became very clear that it was not just one or two persons. It was a crowd. Minna could distinguish the voices of women, children and men and even dogs barking some further distance away. 'I had a bad dream last night and I think this is it.'

'You again with dreams?' said Tetang, dismissively.

Minna was undeterred. 'Ma's father appeared to me and his head was bowed. Then he pointed with his chin and I looked and saw Ngam. He was crying like he used to do in Bamenda.' Minna stopped talking. She had heard the distinct voice of her aunt. Deafening shrills broken at intervals by telling incantations. Minna could not get the words but it was obvious what the odious performance was about.

Minna sprang off the bed and dashed to the door. If Tetang had not warned her to cover herself, she might have ran half-naked outside. She grabbed a wrappa that was on the head bed and wrapped it right up to her armpits. Tetang jumped after her and held her.

'Calm down, Min. Your aunt is coming. Let's wait for her to knock if actually she is coming for us. We may be splitting our heads when there is nothing.'

Minna stayed in the arm-lock just out of respect for her husband and the fact that she could not use her own head. The voice of her aunt vibrated from the living room and in an instant there was the expected knock on their door. Tetang who had slipped on a singlet over baggy shorts, opened the door.

Auntie Aggie immediately fell on Minna, crying her lungs out. Minna tried to brave it to ask what the matter was. But after realising her aunt was in no mood to talk, Minna also started crying especially when she noticed that some two other women who had followed her aunt were also weeping in the sitting room.

Tetang rushed past the women and dashed into the bush to relieve his bladder. Ma's mate held Minna from the other side and the third woman, a friend to her mother held Minna from behind. Together, they led Minna out of her father's house, all four quivering in passionate fits. Minna looked around hoping to see her father. Was he still sleeping or was all this about him?

A crowd had gathered at the far end of the compound where the main house for guests was. As Minna was led towards the crowd, she looked out for her children. Where were they? They used to come over to this house to listen to stories and sometimes would sleep over until the morning.

All eyes were focused on Minna but nobody was telling her anything. Was it Dorothy? Rogers' dream? Was this why Ma had wanted to see Dorothy so badly? Oh Dorothy, no. Minna dug deeper in her lungs and emitted her loudest cry yet. An old woman who used to be very close to her mother stepped forward and cleaned Minna's face with her hands. 'It is God's work my child,' said the woman and making way for the four women to step into the house.

Minna saw all her children, sitting on stools and their heads bowed. Akwen carried Ngam and was rocking him to the rhythm of her crying. Her husband was holding Rita who was convulsing in a loud lament. Minna wanted to go to them but the women held fast and led her into a side room that Minna had never cared to enter before.

The room was dark and it smelled like damp, farm compost. Harvested crops had probably been kept here for long, Minna assumed. Minna could not see anything but she could feel that they were people inside other than the women who held her. Somebody opened the wooden window and the early morning light fell in the room like some angel had just appeared. The room did not look at all habitable for it was jammed with tins of oil, cocoyam heaps, bunches of plantains some of which were ripening, corn hanging from the bare rafters, farm baskets, hoes, old tin containers and assorted bamboo furniture.

To one side of the room was an aged bamboo bed and on it a thin, bare mattress. Lying quiet and still on the bed with the face slightly turned towards the bare mud block wall was a woman with familiar clothing. A kaba that Minna had bought for her mother. Who would dare to wear a dress Minna had not yet seen on her mother?

The women held Minna over the bed and Minna could now see better. Rogers' dream. Something snapped inside Minna and she lost complete touch.

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Minna woke up some thirty minutes later with her husband and children hovering over her. Then she saw her aunt and other people and the picture jumped into her mind with vivid prominence. 'Oh Ma, why didn't you tell me? I should have gone and brought Dorothy.' Minna wept raising her hands in the air. Her mother had gone and she had not made satisfactory peace with her. How was she going to live the rest of her life not knowing whether her mother hated or liked her? And all this just because of Dorothy. 'What happened auntie?'

'We don't know, Min,' Ma's mate quickly cut in amidst sobs. 'Just her time I guess. I am finished. Ma was our comfort in this compound. What am I going to do without her?' The woman raised her hands in the air, raising her voice.

The sentiments sounded so hollow that both Minna and her aunt turned their faces away from Ma's mate. In her mind, Minna knew one thing. The woman was now over the moon for she was going to have Pa all to herself. This woman was the cause of Ma's hypertension which Minna assumed was what had killed Ma. Therefore the woman was responsible for Ma's death. How Minna wished she could have the courage that moment not only to tell the woman off but also to openly accuse her for having killed Ma.

Auntie Aggie was the one who could not hold herself. She cut the woman with a very biting look that went from the woman's bare feet to her tousled hair. And the woman saw it. Tetang who sensed the mounting tension asked all the women to move out to start receiving sympathisers that were already coming in their droves.

Ma was a well known wife of the Widikum people and carried royal blood even if of a different village. Everyone was going to be there and expected a hectic funeral. Minna had to snap out quickly from the grieving to start planning for an occasion where she was going to be the central figure especially where organising and paying the bills were concerned. Rational Tetang was the one who made that patently clear to Minna as they were left just the two of them in their room.

Pa was a poor pensioner and besides, everyone knew Ma had big children and in-laws who should be able to entertain people well. People were going to blame Minna and her brother and sister if they could not have enough to drink or eat.

Minna followed Tetang to Pa's room to get Pa to tell them what they had to do. They met a man who looked so pale that Minna thought he was about to give up the ghost also. Pa was shaking as if electric current was running through his body. This was a shocking discovery for Minna. That Pa's love for Ma still ran that deep? A man who had been behaving as if Ma was the worst error in his life?

Minna knelt on the floor besides his father and held his hands. She too began to cry and could not bring herself to console her father as she had wished to. It was Tetang who spoke the consoling words and begged father and daughter to find some peace in order to be able to handle the more urgent business of organising the funeral.

Pa had to invite two of his brothers to join him in giving the advice.

At around Midday, while some elderly women were embalming Ma's inert body with the sap of plantains, Tetang was on his way to Bamenda in a pick-up truck he had hired. Minna stayed behind to rally the women in the compound to go and harvest food and cook while getting the men to split wood and make arrangements for palm wine.

In the evening of the following day, Tetang returned with a coffin, a cow, crates upon crates of beer and a loaded pocket. In a second vehicle were his relatives whom he had brought all the way from Bafut and a very large dance troupe. He had followed his in-law's advice to the letter.

Tetang arrived just in time for the corpse to be tucked into the coffin in readiness for a religious service that was to precede an all-night wake keep. Singing, dancing, praying and eating dominated the night as the bereaved family and sympathisers sought to celebrate Ma's life and contemplate on her departure.

It was during a session of dancing that Minna was shocked to find herself being dragged to an isolated dark spot. Minna tried to resist but was too weak to shove off her aunt's firm grip. 'This better be good,' she said to her aunt when they had stopped moving.

'Some of our people from Wum took Ma's clothes to that medicine man in Batibo.'

'Medicine man and for what? People have given all kinds of reasons why Ma suddenly died. None of them cuts any ice with me and I don't think the medicine man in Batibo would say anything better.'

This did not deter Auntie Maggie. 'That man's reputation runs to the remotest part of this country. Even ministers and priests consult him. Who then are you to deny his conclusions? You need to know this so you would know who your enemies really are and protect yourself and your children. Not everybody who smiles at you loves you.'

'Who then is that person who hates me so much Auntie that he had to extend it to my mother?' Minna gave up.

'Ma's mate. She put witchcraft on Ma.'

Predictable! Minna had heard that one several times over and she herself had suspected it until she had met the Doctor who had been taking care of Ma. Some were even accusing but Pa. But Minna on the strong advice of her husband made up her mind to stick to the Doctor's conclusion. The Doctor was adamant that Ma had no chance as a consequence of the chronic levels her hypertension had reached. If at all Ma's mate was involved, then it was because her entry into a once monogamous household had provoked Ma's hypertension. 'I don hear Auntie. Can we go back now?'

To say Auntie Aggie was disappointed was saying the least. She just pulled her hand away and left without uttering another word. Minna clapped her hands and followed passively. She was too tired to think or hate any person. Not until her mother would have been put six feet deep and in peace.

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Ma was buried behind her house. The funeral ceremonies lasted a week. It was quite a big ceremony. Two cows were slaughtered, several chickens slaughtered, and there flowed limitless rivers of palm wine and beer. Everybody in Wikikum had at least a bite and a sip.

Even if Minna still regretted she had not made complete peace with Ma, she was however happy that she had given her mother a befitting burial. She had emptied all her savings and her husband who was the first in-law of the compound had executed his role with flair and great responsibility. No franc had been spared and he had sponsored the best dance group that formed part of the ritual animation.

The ceremony over, the family had to meet to count the cost and make the final prayer for the faithfully departed. Minna was completely tired and was not looking forward to any long acrimonious meeting. All she was looking forward to was going back home, raising her children, coming to terms with the loss and investigate why her brother and Dorothy never showed up for the funeral of their own mother.

The absence of her sister and brother were the only blip on the very successful funeral. Everybody kept asking why Ma's own children could not come to bury their own mother despite several radio messages, which had been sent. Minna did not like the fact that people left the funeral with questions in their minds. It was unpardonable for grown-up children to completely ignore their mother's funeral.

The question was what at the beginning dominated the meeting that Pa had summoned in his house. Some relatives began by openly faulting Ma for not having taught her children proper manners. One even dared to declare boldly that Ma was the one who had fostered Dorothy's loose lifestyle and Pa did not even call the person to order. To Minna that meant, Pa was part of the conspiracy. Minna got up, rudely interrupting another speaker to defend her mother. Not even her husband who tried to pull her down could stop her.

'I can now understand why Ma died. That's what most of you here wished for and worked very hard for. You succeeded first by giving her hypertension and now you have killed her.'

Minna's uncle rose to silence her. But Minna was not yet finished.

'Yes, you can say I am as stubborn as my mother, I don't care. But what I care about is people who know nothing insulting my mother especially as she is not here to answer back. Is Dorothy the first woman to be loose? I know of my own aunts in here who have committed worse atrocities than Dorothy and they live happily here on my father and have the audacity to criticise my sister. Women who often ran to Ma for this or that. They now have voices. Yes they do. Ma is dead. Curse Dorothy and her brother as much as you want. But keep my mother out of it.'

Minna sat down in deference to her father who was up. 'I agree totally with what Big Mami has said. It is not proper to talk evil about the dead lest they come back and haunt us. Dorothy and Nchoh would answer for their absence to their mother and to God. They are aware of the grave crime they have committed. What I want us now to talk about is not about these two mature children but about this child Ma has left behind.'

This last part of the speech made Minna frown. Ngam was not up for any discussion. He had not been discussed about before he was brought to Ma. It had been an affair between her mother and her. Minna could discuss the issue with her father one-to-one but not in an open family meeting where many were only interested in castigating whatever came out from Ma's womb. Minna rose again.

'Thank you Pa for speaking well but Ngam is not going to be a topic for this family meeting. Tomorrow, I am taking him with me back to Bamenda. I want to challenge anybody here who thinks he or she has a stronger voice over this child than me to say it.'

Pa's second wife stood up. 'I am your mother too. I have a voice over that child. Since you brought the child here, I have been feeding him too. We all like him and he has been growing up well. I don't see any reason why he has to go back to Bamenda. After all, you brought him here because you couldn't take care of him.'

Minna shot up like she had been bitten on her backside. 'Who gave you the right to speak like that? You are just a wife and not a child of this compound. You should concern yourself with taking care of your children and husband. And I mean children from your own womb.'

'You are insulting me,' the woman rose again, pointing a finger at Minna.

'No I am not insulting you. I am celebrating with you the fact that you now have Pa all to yourself.'

The crowd erupted in protest.

'Enough Minna,' shouted the old man. Tetang pulled Minna down and she sat on the chair with a thud. Pa went on. 'This is supposed to be a meeting of peace and reconciliation. Cursed is that person who wants to transform it into a forum of war. I am going to suspend this meeting for people to go back and calm themselves. When I sense that the air is good, I will summon everyone for the meeting.' With those solemn words, Pa



rose from his specially carved stool and limped into his bedroom. That was the end of the meeting and Minna knew there was never going to be another meeting. End of the story.

Minna was not going to wait for another meeting, she told her husband as people trickled out of the house, discussing angrily. Tetang was only too happy with the sentiments for he had had enough of Widikum. The funeral had left him completely franc-less and he always felt as vulnerable as a stray chick in the bush when his pockets were empty. Early the following morning, Tetang just had to go and lie to his father-in-law that he had had a message that his presence was urgently needed at the office. And so he had to travel immediately with his family.

Some two hours later, the Frus were set. Minna took Ngam from her aunt and daring anyone to cease the child from her, went with him into the car. Family members watched with expressions that ranged from apathy to contempt. Minna's arrogance had been too heavy to bear. 'They say you are too proud.' That was what her aunt told her through the window of the car.

'Tell them I don't care,' said Minna shaking the hands of her most favourite person in the world. 'Auntie Aggie, immediately you sense that you are not comfortable here, call me and I will set up some business for you in Bamenda.'

'Don't worry about me, little sister. I am a very adaptable person. I can handle them. I will be fine. All I ask of you is that you take care of my father very well. But the most important assignment I am going to give you is that you look for your sister and brother to come and mourn their mother before it is too late.'

'I don hear, Auntie.'

Nobody waved as the car slipped out of the compound but for some children who were sad to see their new playmates depart. The Fru's children waved back with a mixture of sadness and yet relief. Without their grandmother, Widikum was no longer exciting. Their grandmother used to keep them rapt with stories and riddles and teaching them some basic things like the production of palm oil, cooking some traditional delicacies and the local language. The children had also cried themselves to exhaustion and the third term was to begin in under a week.

Minna's exhausted mind no longer dreaded the road. Her new preoccupation was now Ngam. She bit her lips in frustration. Back to sender; that was what Ma had done. Though during the meeting Minna had been very strident about taking the child back, it was merely out of a logical sense of responsibility and fighting the challenge from other family members. Opportunists, she thought of them. There was no love lost between Ngam and her. She was not Ma who loved everything that had the imprint of Dorothy on it. She was not a totally free woman who could cope with the burden of an infant that was not hers. How was she going to accept that a new agenda had to be drawn for her and Ngam was at the centre of it? How she wished Ma had not died. Ma had really relieved her of this burden only for it to be dumped once more on her. And this time around, it was going to be for good.

For good? No way. She shook her head resolutely as her husband manipulated the car uphill. There was still another option. The child had a mother and he could as well go back to his mother. Minna squeezed a hidden fist between her leg and the door. Good thinking. She had a big assignment indeed. Not keeping Ngam but looking for Dorothy and giving her back her child.

Minna could now afford to teach beyond the normal closing time. The housemaid she had got turned out to be a real blessing. All the children were preparing for either their final or certificate exams and had to spend more time and energy on their books. Also as a teacher of a final year class, Minna was supposed to give make-up classes, some of which ran till late. With Manka at home, everything worked well.

The girl who was a distant relative of Tetang's was handy in every aspect of domestic care – laundry, mopping, dish washing, baby-sitting and very efficient in the kitchen. She often woke up the earliest, and slept the latest. And she worked without complaining. Minna always felt guilty when she would come back late and see the girl still roaming about like a worker bee and carrying Ngam on her back after having washed basket-loads of clothes, fed everybody and mopped all the floors.

Manka was indeed the greatest blessing Minna could wish for after the pounding disaster of her mother's sudden death. She was whistling alone in gratitude to God as she headed towards the school gate as a crimson sun was about to dip down the western plains. From the eastern skies appeared thick nimbus clouds, slowly scudding westwards and casting gloomy shadows over the town. It was transforming a previously warm, bright day into a chilly, premature evening. Minna quickened her strides and pulled out her umbrella from her handbag in readiness for the eventual downpour. She had left her students behind in class to copy some notes from the board. She was alone, as all her colleagues had long left. The security man was however there to open the gate for her.

'Taxi drivers are on strike today. You may not have a taxi coming now.' The tall, strongly built security man told Minna who had totally forgotten. Had she been vigilant, she would have called Tetang to come and pick her up. She picked out the phone from her bag and realised she had no call credit.

'Is there any call box around here where I could call my husband?' She knew the answer to that but she just had to say it hoping the man could pity her take further measures to help her. Like offering his own phone. But the man did not care as he shook his head with apathy and went back into the concrete shed where he had been lying on some dirty bed and smoking in peace.

'Eh, I forgot.' It was the security man, rushing out of his shed, a stub of cigarette between his fingers. A woman came here looking for you.'

Minna who had already crossed out of the campus stepped back across the gate. 'Who?'

'One big, light-skin woman. Heavy backside.' The man laughed in a telling way.

'Did she tell you her name?' Minna frowned in contempt of his vulgarity.

'No. I no ask. She wanted to go right in to see you but you know the rules. I couldn't let her in. I instead directed her to your house.'

'My house? Didn't she say why she wanted to see me?'

The security man shook his head and puckered his face. It was a clear indication he was bored with the conversation.

'Thanks,' said Minna with uncertainty and went back out of the campus. She looked up at the sky. There was no sign of optimism. The cloud cover over the school was total. How was she going to make it over some one kilometre under the rain before she could reach a call box? And her umbrella was one of those tiny fashionable things that could only cover the hair.

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As she marched over a raised concrete pavement pondering whether to go for it or take cover in the staff quarters that was strictly built for the school administrators, she heard the rev of a motor bike and at the far end of the road she could see it speeding in the direction

of the school. She breathed in relief hoping the bike was going to solve her immediate transport problem. She even thought the bike had been specially sent to pick her up when it slowed down and stopped by her.

The young bike rider had a woman passenger behind. A big, light-skin woman. Minna recognised her, frowned and walked on. She would prefer to walk under the rain to talking to the damn woman.

'Please, Madam, excuse me.' Minna heard a rather polite voice and that tempted her to stop. She had been expecting but some abrasive invectives. Minna stood and watched by the corner of her eyes as Bridget panted after her. Bridget was wearing a modest kaba that covered her right to the shins. Minna was more used to her explicit skin-tight outfits. A kaba on Bridget was very strange.

'What do you want?' said Minna coldly.

Bridget stopped a good distance away and for once looked shy. She bowed her head and fiddled with her fingers. 'I want to apologise for the way I treated you last time. I am truly sorry. I was drunk. I have been looking for you ever since to apologise but each time I come here, the gateman would not let me in. So I told myself that today, I would wait until you close.'

'And where have you been waiting today?'

'I have a friend who lives here in the staff quarters. I told her to beep me once you came out of class. I was in another friend's house just above the staff quarters. This is the friend's husband who kindly drove me here when I learnt you were out.' The man on the handlebars bowed slightly. Minna ignored him.

Minna found Bridget's story too hard to believe. That a woman whom she barely knew and with whom she was in bad terms with would stop her busy world just to come and apologise? What did Bridget want? 'Well, apology taken. Can I go now?' Minna turned to go.

'Actually Madam, I also came to talk to you about Ngam.'

Minna's heart leapt out of her chest and she threw a hand across her mouth. 'Which Ngam?' she quipped, turning sharply around.

'The one in your house.' Bridget avoided Minna's eyes.

'Ngam? My child? What has he got to do with you? No madam. I am not prepared to listen to you say anything about my child. Not now, not ever. Now if you would excuse me.' Minna's phone rang and she snatched it out of her bag. She prayed it was Tetang. She would ask him to come over quickly and pick her up. Bridget could get lost. Places were getting dark though Minna could read the name on the screen.

'Hello, little husband,' she said with some style. Her brother-in-law, Dimo was on the other side of the phone.

'My wife, don't be angry that you didn't see or hear from me when Ma died.'

'I know you travelled abroad. Your brother told me and I saw the big cheque you sent. Thanks dear.'

'I could have done even more if I was at home. I promise to make it up to you. So how are you and the children?'

'They are all fine. It's busy time now for them, you know. Exams and all that. When did you come back?' Minna turned and saw Bridget retreating towards the bike. Minna didn't care.

'Three days ago and I came and found a mountain load of work in the bank awaiting my urgent attention. I just had to dig in immediately. That's why I couldn't call earlier. My brother doesn't even know I am back. I'll call him later. Why I actually even called you is about this letter I found in my house from Dorothy.'

Minna felt gas bubbles burst in her stomach. She squeezed the stomach and walked back towards the gate. 'Dorothy?'

'Well, the sender as written in the letter is Dorothy. I am not too sure I remember her hand-writing but I believe it's her letter from what she wrote.'

‘When did she leave the letter?’

‘About a week ago according to my house boy. He says she came in looking very distressed and was dying to see me. Although his description of her didn’t very much resemble the Dorothy I used to know, what she wrote however convinced me. You know it’s long time ago that I last saw her. She wrote in the letter that she desperately needed money to come up for the funeral though she says again here that they would not let her go. It’s all very confusing Minna. Was she in some kind of trouble and who is she referring to as they?’

‘I haven’t the slightest idea. Did she say where she was staying?’

‘No. Neither to my houseboy nor in the letter. There is just no reference from where she came nor to where she was going. Does this mean she wasn’t at the funeral?’

‘Not at all Dimo. I haven’t set eyes on that girl for some five years now. She abandoned the child with me and how she did it without anyone seeing her, God alone knows.’

‘I know about that Minna. You know what I think? I think she is in some kind of jam and is finding it difficult to pull herself out.’

‘It wouldn’t surprise me in the least. Getting in jams is her stock-in-trade. She must have got herself entangled in the web of another ruthless man. And like always, it’s others like you and I who have to get her out and get little thanks after. If you say you couldn’t recognise the description of her then it means she was probably just a bag of bones.’

‘Yes the description I got was of a woman like that. From what my boy told me, it doesn’t seem as if it is just about a man. I think she is in a worse situation.’

No, Minna was very sure about her suspicion. ‘It is about a man, Dimo. I know the capacity of my sister. The man must have wrapped her in some scam or she is pregnant and needs money to abort. I know my sister. But sorry for her. This time around, she is going to stew in her juices. Don’t bother yourself my husband. She is reaping what she so gladly sowed.’

‘Don’t talk like that Minna. A good heart never stops beating and I know yours is good. If you can’t save your sister, nobody else can. I’ll keep looking out for her and if I get any further development, I’ll keep you posted. Give my love to my children and tell them I’ll send them cards.’

‘Don’t drop Dimo. What about the new girl you were talking about? Do I hear wedding bells?’

‘They don’t ring in my backyard. Bye.’ Dimo dropped.

Minna held the phone against her chest and cast her eyes towards the sky. What was her sister up to? A drop of rain scattered in her eyes and she brought her head back to its natural position, just in time to see the motor bike pull away with Bridget clutching the rider as if pledging him her love for life. A friend’s husband indeed. What a laugh!

But it was no laughing matter when Minna saw a stubby finger being wagged in her direction. Bridget was warning her? Whatever for? Why was she leaving anyway when she had not vomited all that she had apparently accumulated in her rotten stomach? Ngam! Minna remembered that was what the bloody woman had wanted to talk about. What exactly did she have in common with Ngam?

The rain started drumming on the roofs in the staff quarters. Minna opened the umbrella and decided against the long walk. She went straight to the principal’s house and begged him to call her husband. Tetang came later and picked her up with Rogers who had stayed behind to copy notes with his classmates.

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‘Tee, Bridget is not just a coincidence.’ That was the first thing Minna said to her husband as she climbed into the car next to him. Then she told him about the strange visit and its curious aim.

‘You should have allowed her say more.’

‘No, Tee. I am not going to discuss any of my children with a strange woman.’

'But Ngam is different.'

'Not really. My sister's child is my child.'

This was a new sentiment and Tetang noted it with a grin.

'That woman is nothing but a troublemaker. Seeking for notice, if you ask me.'

'But why seek for your notice Min?'

That was a very important question. Minna looked out of the window to reflect. The rain was coming on in violent sheets. Rogers who was sitting behind had closed his eyes. He was very tired and had no other thing in his mind than food and a long nap.

'Sometimes, it is not good to give an opening to an intruder,' said Minna in a mood to philosophise. 'You may only be opening up more opportunities for her to hassle you further. She would discover more of your vulnerable points and kick you there. That is what I think this Bridget is all about.'

'She may not have picked you at random as a subject for some sinister game. There may be some more poignant reason why she keeps appearing in your life. Look at it Min. Before Ngam, there was no Bridget. But since Ngam appeared she is almost becoming part of your life.'

'Don't exaggerate it Tee. It's not as if I see her everyday.'

'Ngam has been a most critical point of your life. Why has she suddenly decided to appear and going to the point of actually talking about Ngam? Min, I think we need to take this woman more seriously. Last time at the restaurant, I thought it was drunken madness. But now that she consciously came to school and waited for you to close, then there is more to this woman than meets the eye. We should find out. If you are not going to do so, I am. My family needs peace. The children are preparing for their exams. They don't need any trouble at this time.'

'But I don't see her worrying any of the children,' said Minna without conviction.

'Today is Ngam. Tomorrow it may be Rogers or Rita. We have to find out what this woman is all about.'

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Minna folded her hands over her handbag in silent concession. One of the unspoken reasons why she did not want to engage herself with Bridget was the fact that she already had a full basket of worries.

First, there was Dorothy. Her brother-in-law had just added another conundrum to it with his haunting phone call. Then there was her brother, who like Dorothy had disappeared for ages and had also ignored his mother's burial. It was Minna's responsibility to sort these two persons out. Her father was too busy savouring the delights of his now unique wife to bother about wayward, grown-up children.

Then there was the trouble of sorting out her mother's property and things she had left undone. There was her mother's farms with crops that needed tendering. Ma's palm trees were teetering with enormous cones of ripening nuts and these had to be harvested and processed into oil. There were some groups that claimed Ma owed them and Ma's dresses had to be given to some special relatives as a traditional imperative.

All these were in Minna's hands and it was already too much for her just to think of how she was going to start. And besides, she had to take care of children who had difficult exams ahead of them. No way was she going to allow some worthless woman add another package on her already over-loaded carriage. She was not going to give the chance. If Tetang cared he should handle Bridget.

'I have to go to Douala,' she announced to her husband after having given a detailed account of Dimo's concerns about Dorothy.

'Why?' asked Tetang with some irritation. He needed her around for the time, until the whole family would have recovered from the impact of the tragic holiday and besides, the children's exams were not far off. Her constant presence was of critical psychological and practical importance to the children. She was the teacher and mother and she alone knew

the right kind of food they should eat at such times.

'I need to find out what is happening to Dorothy and prepare her to take back her child. There is no other person to do it. Even if she is dying, I am still the only one who can claim her corpse and bring her to be buried. This is the punishment for being responsible.'

Tetang stayed quiet. He looked at his son in the rear mirror and was glad he was sleeping. The conversation was not for his ears. He had to concentrate on his studies. Tetang cut a side-glance at his wife. He did not want to say anything that might make him sound insensitive. Minna had spoken in such a way that he had no other choice but to concede. 'Why not wait until after the children's exams?'

'If you heard the way your brother sounded, you wouldn't stay another night. Let me just go and clear the air. I'll be there just over the weekend.'

Tetang did not respond but focussed straight ahead on the road.

Minna knew he was not happy. 'The weekend after next, would that be better?'

'Fine,' he mumbled and drove on.

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Tetang was driving through the Nkwen main commercial street when just opposite a petrol station, he saw a woman wave at him. It was a brief wave but it had a certain nasty but compelling quality. He slowed down as he approached the woman who was standing alone on his side of the road. She was wearing some rather expensive lace and was beaming with a conquering smile. He actually stopped and wound down the glass to see the woman who was greeting him with such familiarity.

He did not know whether to be angry or happy when he recognised her. He just put on this guilty face that spoke of the ambiguous state of his mind. How could he be harbouring ill feelings towards a woman who looked like she was prepared to die for him?

'I was just greeting,' she said in her girlish voice, spicing it up with puckered red lips.

Her intention was so glaring. 'I see,' said Tetang nervously, his heart throbbing heavily. He drove on after hesitating. He felt as if he had behaved badly by driving away without at least saying something nice to the woman. The woman meant no harm. Why did Minna detest her this much? Why did he also hate the woman?

Yes, the woman was flirting but she looked and sounded nice. Millions of women around the world flirted but that did not make them criminals. Was he supposed to hate Bridget just because of his wife's prejudiced mind? Every person had a good and bad side. But why was Bridget after his wife? Maybe he could find out more.

He parked by the roadside and on foot went towards Bridget. He stopped however when he saw that Bridget was talking with another woman. It did not feel right. Why was he even going to meet the woman? Clear the air? His body and soul were not on the same wavelength and that did not make him totally comfortable. Would Bridget misinterpret his actions? Stopping his car just to talk to her and in the open street?

Tetang changed his mind and instead entered a bar, which was just about fifty metres further from where she was standing. He sat on one of the tables under an open canopy. He had a good view of Bridget but she clearly could not see him through the tangle of traffic and pedestrians.

He ordered a beer and from the barman, got good information about Bridget. He also got information about the man with whom she was now living, Albert Njotu. This was the very man who had accompanied her to the club and restaurant. Tetang decided it would be easier talking to the man to know more about this enigmatic woman who was driving Minna crazy. Talking directly to Bridget he felt, he might just be compromising himself. Bridget looked like the kind of woman who went for what she wanted and was not shy about creating a stir.

As he sipped his beer all alone, still looking in Bridget's direction, he began to ask himself why he was becoming curious about knowing more about this woman. Was he attracted to her? Then why would he be going to ask about her from her man? Fishing in

muddy waters? Perhaps, he owed it to his wife to find out what exactly this woman wanted. That way they might be able to avert any future mishap. Also, Minna might find some peace in the whirlwind of worries she had been sucked into. That was a marital duty.

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He waited until Bridget had disappeared before running back to his car and driving back down the busy street where commercial vehicles battled for space with ordinary cars, daring hawkers and established businesses. Tetang whistled in uncertainty, trapped in an endless file of vehicles that barely moved. How he wished he had taken the decision much earlier when the road was still free. Now there was no way to turn back for the traffic on the other side was also, unremittingly tight.

It took him over thirty minutes to come out of the main road. That was just under a kilometre. He was glad anyway to be out of the jam though he was still not sure about the outcome of his mission. What was he scared of anyway? He was just going to talk to the man. What was bad about that?

He recognised the compound in an isolated stretch of Banja Road as had been perfectly described by the barman. It was a two-apartment block with an all-round fence of metal grille on stone. It was a simple edifice with the façade painted red and each apartment with a small veranda. The front yards were however quite spacious with one having a guava tree at the centre and the other having over-grown cypress shrubs on one side of the fence. This was Njotu's side.

Tetang came out of the car and leaned on the gate. He felt haunted by the eerie silence that prevailed. There was no sign of life anywhere close and this was made worse by the dirty spread of rotting leaves and wild grass that dominated Mr Njotu's own front yard. His own wall was covered by a maze of cracks and disintegrating plaster. The red paint had faded making it clear which of the occupants of the two apartments were either underprivileged or unconcerned about their living conditions.

Tetang touched the gate. It was not bolted. He entered and cautiously walked over the yard and to the veranda. The place smelt of neglect. It was hard to believe somebody had lived here within the past year. But the barman had insisted that Mr Njotu was the proud occupant of this apartment and here he lived his life daily.

The door was panelled and the wood old. It looked like it could buckle at the slightest touch. Tetang felt it with his fingers before knocking. He gave three knocks. There was no response and no movement either. He placed his ear against the door and listened. Still there was no sound. He knocked again and even harder.

Tetang moved to the window that opened on the veranda and peeped through the side where some drapes ended. It was dark inside and he could not see anything distinct. He went and knocked again without any optimism. 'Hello,' he dared. Then again and louder.

He was about to give up when he heard something like scuffling of slippers. He knocked and this time, a voice responded. Not a healthy voice by any standard but still a voice. A human voice. A key clicked in the lock and slowly, the door slipped open. Tetang's hair stood on end when he saw the man who owned the voice. Not a ghost he prayed. Mr Njotu did not look the very man Tetang had seen in the club and in the restaurant.

With just a loincloth around his bottom half, Mr Njotu looked like a man who had donated not only all the blood in his veins but also all his flesh and soft tissues to a desperate hospital. His slightly bowed torso rippled in loose, thin skin and he looked like his apparently vacuous stomach was about to fall out of his back. His lips were so dry that even the untrained eye would talk of extreme starvation. If anyone needed a true showcase of adult malnutrition, Mr Njotu was the perfect specimen. Tetang wondered how the man even moved about.

'I am sorry for bothering you,' said Tetang after overcoming the shock. 'I was just looking for a vacant apartment for a friend who has just been transferred to town.' That was the best excuse he could think of for showing up in this environment.



'Why not sit down Mr Fru. You cannot just come to my place for the first time and pass like that.'

Tetang was surprised with the vigour in the voice. 'I am really in a hurry and I promise to stay some other time.'

'I insist Mr Engineer. You did magic to the bridge in our quarter here or have you forgotten? You can't pass like that without drinking even just a glass of water. I was the chairman of the project committee. That makes me responsible and proud to receive you on the behalf of our quarters. Sit down.' Mr Njotu held the door open for his guest. 'There isn't much for you to sit on but we can manage.'

Tetang walked into a large but dark, cavernous space that contained nothing besides a collection of four old cane chairs around a frail cane table. The floor was dirty and old plastic tiles were coming off.

'Do sit down and make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a second.' Tetang hit the man with a look of incredulity. How was one supposed to be comfortable in a place this empty and haunting? The walls were bare and moulding over. Tetang sat at the edge of one of the chairs, to ensure his legs carried the greater part of his weight. The chair did not look like it had integrity and stability.

Mr Njotu came back empty handed, a painful grin on his face. 'I am sorry. Bridget finished the last beer I had in the fridge. She can be so irresponsible sometimes. And she will never try to replace it. She is always like that. Embarrassing me at the most unexpected moments.'

'Think no more about it. I wouldn't even have accepted if it was there. I just had a couple of drinks.'

Quietly, Mr Njotu came and sat by him. 'You do know me, don't you?'

Tetang was taken aback by the question. 'Of course I do,' replied Tetang not sure he understood the question to its depth.

'I thought I should ask. At the club and the restaurant, you made as if we had not met before.'

'I did? I guess I was overwhelmed by the occasions.'

'You once passed here and refused to come in to eat. Then I was not like this. This house was not like this. I am sure you are surprised by what you see.'

Tetang felt embarrassed. He could not remember having ever passed here before. 'Well it's not my place to judge.'

'It will just be natural to feel surprised that a man in my position should be living in a place like this. I have had problems my brother. The wife got up one morning, packed everything when I had gone to work, and by the time I returned, the house was empty. She even went away with all my four children. Just like that. It is four years now and I haven't seen or heard from her or the children.'

Tetang wondered why the man was exposing his private woes to him a stranger. He however gave the man his ear.

'I however hear she went straight to her village, some remote hamlet somewhere close to the Nigerian border with the children. I will not bother going to look for them. Besides just the thought of the road fills me with dread. The only time I did that road was when I went to pay her bride price and I swore to myself that that would be the last. Let her go. I am alive and kicking.'

Alive, yes, but kicking? That was far-fetched. Tetang frowned and looked away. What was this man doing by unloading his probably disastrous personal history on him? Invoke his sympathy? Tetang had nothing to do with the man's matrimonial blues. He was no marriage counsellor. 'Sorry to hear that,' Tetang heard himself say with strained courtesy.

'Don't pity me. I used to be okay before all these things happened to me. Let me show you my album. Maybe you will remember me very well.' Mr Njotu rose.

Tetang wanted to plead to his host not to bother. But Mr Njotu was too quick for him. Tetang cursed himself for having got a job he least bargained for; a social worker. He had

come for an entirely different business but his host had hijacked the agenda.

'See!' Mr Njotu shoved an opened photo album in front of Tetang. 'I was almost three times what I am now.' There was this evocative beam on Mr Njotu's face.

'So?' Tetang would have asked if he was not under the man's roof. He just browsed through the album with indifference until he came to a photo of Bridget without all the excess flesh and flushed with delicate exuberance. His host was standing behind him and making unsolicited comments.

'My Bridget!' said Mr Njotu with mixed emotions. 'My on and off partner. She used to be a looker. I don't know where all the fat has suddenly come from. As you can see she was a queen. Every man I knew wanted her. Everywhere she went, men stood up. They wooed her and made all kinds of promises. But I was the one who won.'

'Then you were lucky.'

'No Mr Fru. I had charm and elegance, which my rivals could not match. I had cash. Though the wife had left, I was still fine. We used to spend most of our time in hotels. I was regional director for the marketing board. You know how the board used to vibrate in those days. My wife was foolish. She ran away not because I was poor but because she was angry I was having Bridget. We are men right? We can have as many women as we want and we don't need the permission of our wives. They are our property, right?'

Tetang knew his host was pleading for some kind of solidarity but he was not going to give him. It was very clear the outcome of the gender war on the man's side was not a successful one. 'For me, I need the cooperation of my wife to get on.'

'That's your own,' Mr Njotu said tersely. 'I am not the one suffering now. She is the one suffering. Besides I have Bridget who is filling my life better than that silly woman ever did.'

There was this distant look in his face. Clear evidence for Tetang that the man was lying. 'Are you already married to Bridget?'

'That's my greatest wish in the world ever since I met her. I wanted her first as a second wife and now she would have been the only wife but Bridget says she doesn't like to be tied down. I know why she is refusing especially now. I lost my job and the money I used to have is no longer there. If not of this block that I managed to build when I was working, I would have been left with nothing. The rent my tenants pay are nothing. That's why Bridget would not marry me.'

The man's voice resonated with regret. Tetang almost felt sorry for him. 'Perhaps you have not put your case well to her.'

'Not at all my brother. Bridget is not a woman for one man. She says it openly though she says I am her base. When all else fails, she runs back to me.'

'And you still accept her?'

'What can I do Mr Fru? Tell me. Look at me. Do I look like somebody who can attract a new woman? I had tuberculosis and people went around spreading false stories that I had AIDS. The women ran away. Bridget was the only one who believed me and I took the test and showed her the results. That is why she still believes in me and others don't. She was the only one who was by me throughout my stay in the hospital. Cooking for me and even bathing me. I should stay loyal to her. I owe her that.'

Tetang wondered whether the man was not still plagued by the tuberculosis. Shouldn't he run away? 'Then she should marry you now.'

'And eat stones? I am even happy she goes out. Often, she brings what she earns for us to share.'

Pimp! That was the word that came to Tetang's mind. Eating from sinful earnings. 'There is something I wanted to ask you if you don't mind. My wife and I have had some encounters with Bridget and they have not been altogether pleasant. Do you think she is bearing a grudge against us?'

Mr Njotu laughed until all the feeble flaps of skin on his body danced. 'That is how she always starts.'

'I don't understand,' said Tetang, puzzled.

'You have caught her eye. If not your face then at least your pockets.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Don't be shocked Mr Fru. That's how Bridget operates. When she is dying for you, she will do all to get you. I saw her make the moves in the restaurant but when she is in her elements, I can't dare to cross her. Just look at her and me. She will crush me at the snap of a finger if I dared to interfere.'

Tetang still could not get over the shocking revelation. And Bridget was almost winning. He remembered the recent incident and cursed himself for not being more perceptive. 'If she hasn't realised it, tell her it's a lost battle. I love my wife very much and wouldn't trade the tiniest fraction of my love for her for another woman.'

'Bridget is not just another woman, my friend. She remains a very beautiful woman in spite of the new weight. She is pretty and I know if you really get to meet her one on one, you will leave with a different impression.'

Tetang could now see clearly. This man was nothing short of a rotten pimp. 'No thank you,' he said with firmness. 'Tell her it can never happen and warn her to stay away from my wife.'

'Do I detect the beginning of a threat there? I will defend Bridget with my last energy. That I can guarantee you. I may not look a warrior but I have a loyal team to watch over my affairs and Bridget is one of my most important affairs.'

Tetang could see the menacing determination on his host's cadaverous head. He got up. 'Thanks for you hospitality Mr Njotu. I should leave now.' He pushed the chair behind and went towards the door.'

'Thanks Mr Fru and I hope you will visit me again.' Mr Njotu walked his guest right to his car. 'Sorry I don't have an apartment for your friend.'

'Which friend?' Tetang remembered and felt foolish. He did not utter another word until he had pulled the car out of site. 'Idiot,' he swore and cursed himself for having undertaken the visit in the first place. He was however happy for one thing. He could now confirm that Bridget was not just an innocent woman and that interacting with her could lead to trouble. They had to avoid this Bridget by all means. That she could actually be scheming to harm Minna in one way or the other just to take Minna's place? Tetang smiled, amused by the thought. Life was not always as straight as one held.

Tetang did not tell Minna about his encounter with Mr Njotu. Telling Minna would only add to her already insupportable pile of woes. The most sensitive angle to his fear was the suspicion he might arouse in his wife about a liaison between Bridget and himself. He knew how his wife's mind worked. She would say there was no smoke without fire and start making all kinds of insinuations. He could remember the oblique accusations Minna made when Ngam first appeared. No, he just had to avoid such awkward situations.

**M**inna was really looking forward to her trip to Douala. Her central focus was of course Dorothy but she could as well take advantage of the change of scene to relax. Since Ngam came into their lives, it had been one agonising event after the other. Then Ma's death had eroded the last ounce of normalcy in her life. And now she had Dorothy and her brother to sort out. She definitely deserved a break, she told herself as she stretched out in a soft chair under a hair dryer in a chic salon.

As the warm air flowed sensuously through her hair, she consciously fought off the debilitating thoughts that were of late trying to keep her permanent company. Her eyes were half closed as a girl massaged her toes and cured her toenails. This aided her conscious battle and gradually she began to feel as if she was floating over some warm, cuddly clouds. She felt very free and full of inner peace. This was all Sister Samba's doing.

'Nothing like complete indulgence in a beauty salon to take off the stress.' That was what Sister Samba had said and got Minna reluctantly in this very expensive salon. For Minna, salon meant styling her hair at the very most. For the first time in her life, she went beyond that. Not only did she get a first class coiffure, she also had the first ever professional make-up and the results she saw were astounding.

Where had she been all her life? Her new-look fingernails were from a different planet and her toenails were being worshipped like a special goddess. She had at first been uptight about the money but Sister Samba's direct attack about her stinginess had weakened Minna's resolve. After all, she was not the lowest paid civil servant.

A nudge from Sister Samba who was sitting next to her brought Minna back to earth. Minna wanted to protest but what she saw blocked her throat. Bridget was standing opposite her though making as if she was busy adjusting herself with the mirror.

Bridget was once again in her usual outfits. This time it was even more scandalous. Her skin-tight trousers was hanging half-way down her backside, exposing some red-netted pants. She wore a see-through, black blouse that had it not been for the outline of a breast wear, she would have looked practically naked. She really intended to exhibit all the flabby undulations of flesh.

Minna frowned and winked at her friend. They were both filled with horror but kept quiet. Minna then deliberately closed her eyes to blot the woman out of her mind. She had been having the time of her life for goodness sake. Good riddance to women without the slightest moral fibre.

Minna had to open her eyes again when she felt someone standing very close to her. Bridget. This time around she had folded her hands over her chest and was looking directly at Minna. 'Hey Bridge, not another trouble today,' shouted the proprietor of the salon, a tiny but determined woman.

'Tell your husband to keep out of my business.' With that, Bridget left.

Minna wanted to speak but Sister Samba shut her up. 'Take no notice.'

'Did you hear what she said?'

'Minna I have told you to ignore her. I know her type and I know this one very well.'

'Sister, this woman is looking for my trouble oh,' said Minna coming out from the dryer.

'Forget her, I said. I have told you all about her now. I will still remind you. A long time ago, she came to me and I actually thought she was trying to create genuine friendship. I didn't realise that all she was doing was trying to penetrate in order to get easily to my husband. She used to come to my home and I would serve her food. She would tell me the most riveting stories just to keep me in her grip. I even allowed my husband to drive her home in the car. Just the two of them. When I came to discover how stupid I had been, she was going steady with my husband.'

‘What?’ another woman who had been listening secretly shouted then felt embarrassed.

Sister Samba lowered her voice. ‘I can bet my life that this woman is trying to get you steamed up. Tricking you into letting down your guards and grabbing your man. I warned you Minna since that fake letter came.’

‘Are you sure she has not already grabbed him?’

‘Trust me on this one Minna. She hasn’t yet. She is still working on it. I am sure she is getting desperate as she is getting nothing but the cold shoulder. Your Tee is not like my man. May he rest in peace. Don’t give her any impression you are bothered. Ignore her completely. Even when she tries to confront you.’ Mami Samba paused for a moment of reflection. ‘There’s something which has just occurred to me.’ Sister Samba’s voice rose with some frightening excitement.

Minna pushed her face closer to her friend. ‘Yes?’

‘That letter,’ said Sister Samba hitting the arm of Minna’s chair with a finger. ‘Bridget wrote that letter.’ Sister Samba spoke with such finality that Minna almost believed her.

‘How did you come about that?’ said Minna.

‘Do you still have the letter?’

Minna shrugged her shoulders. ‘Tore it into pieces.’

Sister Samba cried in regret. ‘You shouldn’t have. That’s a good record to keep. Good evidence.’

‘What are you getting at, Sister. You are the very one who advised me to ignore the letter and I eventually saw with you. Some desperate girl was trying to play mischief. I saw all the evidence. Wait a minute. Are you saying that girl could have been Bridget?’

‘I wouldn’t put it past Bridget to do such a thing. If you still had the letter, I would have looked for a way to verify the handwriting. But I know deep in my guts that Bridget wrote that letter. All part of her calculated plot to come between you and your man so she can take the spoils. Don’t fall in her trap Minna. I know of many women in this town who have been victims of Bridget’s manipulation.’

Sister Samba’s thinking sounded so plausible that it frightened Minna into silence. ‘Which means she is monitoring my home closely in order to take advantage,’ Minna later reflected aloud.

Sister Samba nodded in the affirmative. ‘That girl would stop at nothing to achieve her ambition. But in this case, she can never succeed. Your man is made of sterner stuff.’

‘That is not at all consoling sister. Iron is hard but when you keep hitting at it, it eventually gives way. I have to fight that girl. She has declared war.’

‘No Minna,’ said Sister Samba slapping her laps with both hands. ‘Just what she wants. Bring you down to her level and lose the respect of your husband. Play it cool Minna and ignore her. Don’t just talk to her. When you see her, raise your nose in the air and walk away. The real fight is your husband who will do it and he is succeeding.’

Minna was stunned. ‘And how do you know that?’

‘Her methods are getting more and more desperate. She is hitting her head on a stonewall. Don’t be the window that would open the way for her.’

Minna slipped back under the dryer and closed her eyes. This time it was not to relax. It was meant to let all that had just happened and Sister Samba’s words sink in. She was even more frightened of Bridget than before. ‘I am going to raise hell in the house today.’

‘You will do no such thing Minna,’ snapped Sister Samba. ‘Your husband I can assure you is uncrackable. He loves you and his family too much to let a worm like Bridget interfere with him. Attack him for something he has not done, then you are giving him on a platter of gold to Bridget. I run a popular bar Minna. I know everything that goes on in this town. I hear all the stories and know of all the plots. I know almost everybody. I can guarantee you Minna, Tetang is one kind of a man.’

Minna looked at her friend suspiciously. She knew Sister Samba admired her husband but that admiration used to be limited to her respect for his being a very conscious family man. But the way Sister Samba sounded this time made Minna wondered whether that

admiration was not taking a different dimension. Minna however gave her friend good marks for her advice. Tetang was somebody who easily went berserk if he was falsely accused. She needed hard evidence to tackle him.

One thing however that the whole episode had succeeded in doing was imprint in Minna's mind that Bridget was not an issue to be dismissed. She was however not going to share her husband with any other woman. Not a slut for that matter. Over her dead body!

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No matter how much she tried, Minna could not feel at ease as she set out for the journey. Even her packing was done absent-mindedly until it was Akwen who had to select accessories that matched the garments she had chosen. Akwen was the one who folded the clothes and got the suitcase ready.

Minna was nervous talking to Tetang as he drove her to the bus agency. The words did not come out naturally from her for there was that powerful urge in her to scratch his face. There was the distressing image of Bridget and her husband in a passionate embrace at the centre of her mind. Perhaps it was not a good idea to travel out now. Might it be a God given chance for covetous Bridget to go for the big catch?

'Do you know any person called Dara?' asked Minna, looking into Tetang's face.

'Strange name,' replied Tetang looking straight ahead. 'Who is he?'

'Nobody really,' said Minna nervously.

'Dara, Dora. Short for Dorothy, isn't it?'

Minna's whole body shook. 'Dorothy? Yes could be Dorothy?'

'What is it Minna,' Tetang slowed down the car looking serious.

Minna did not respond. She was trying to think. Could the letter have been written by Dorothy? Dorothy in her rush could have written an 'a' in the place of the 'o' in Dora. Then another revolting thought occurred to her. Dorothy and Tetang? That would be the most ridiculous combination Minna could imagine.

If there was a way, Minna could have cancelled the journey. But she had already made all the arrangements with her brother-in-law whom she knew had sold heaven and earth just to receive her. She could not disappoint him. Besides, Auntie Aggie had sent word in the village that she was having serious nightmares about Dorothy and that if Minna did not find her sister urgently, the family might be in for another tragedy. Minna was not going to have the death of another close family member hang forever over her conscience. Except she could prove that Dorothy was trying to tread into territory that was out-of-bounds.

Minna even forgot to give her husband a kiss as she climbed into the bus whose engine was already vibrating in readiness. She managed to give him a brief wave as the bus set sail out of the station.

Minna's mind remained astir as the smooth grind of the engine went along with the enormous box that hauled along some seventy odd passengers southwards. Minna did not feel like one of them. She was alone with her palpitating fears. Not even the soothing music that blared from the speakers had any effect on her. How could one single woman in the world carry such a mountain of worries? And there was nobody who could carry some for her.

The only distraction she had was when the bus stopped somewhere down the coastal plain where lush plantations of bananas and pineapples stretched as far as the eye could go. She went out of the bus to buy some fruits. After serving herself to some peeled pineapples, she stuffed a market bag with paw-paws, lemons and tangerines. These were for her host.

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When Minna began to get the strong smell of mangrove mud and extremely hot, moist air, she knew, she was in Douala. For the first time, she felt excited and anxious to get out of the bus. It was over decade that she last saw Douala.

Not much had changed she acknowledged that with a sigh. Large city, same old mouldy buildings with spots of delightful tall buildings, same traffic stagnation, blocked drains with standing water covered by green algae, bumpy roads, and the old Wouri Bridge that had long passed its sell-by date, still carrying vehicles and trains. The only sight that really brightened her spirits was the sea and the beachfront by the Wouri estuary that exhibited the touch of first class landscaping.

After phoning, Minna had to wait for a further one hour before her brother-in-law showed up. He was driving a big, brand new car and still looked as young and energetic as ever. But Minna could tell the difference had begun to show. He was already greying at the temples and there were one or two grey strands in his well-trimmed goatee.

Dimo always carried this smiling face that it was difficult to tell whether he ever got angry. He was slightly shorter than his older brother but bulkier. He was in a dashing grey suit and exuded the health and status of a well-paid banker.

'It amazes me that with all this wealth and exuberance you are still not ready for Mrs Right.'

'My brother grabbed the last Mrs Right so I am stuck.' Dimo threw Minna's luggage in the boot.

'Liar Dimo. You know your problem? You fear responsibility. Anyway, take me home let me go and rest. And now that there is no woman in that house, I know I am going to starve.'

'Want to bet on that?' Dimo swung the car on the road and before long, they were moving at pedestrian pace. It took two hours to negotiate a distance of barely three kilometres to reach the austere residential quarters of Bepanda. It used to be the exclusive terrain for French colonialists but now it was colonised by the rich and powerful of Douala.

Dimo's residence stood on a crest that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean. It was a fenced duplex buried under ornamental palms and a lone and very tall coconut tree. These kept at bay the harshest effects of the tropical sun. The smell of saline water was a constant here and the lashes of foamy waves always reverberated in the background.

But for the sweltering heat, Minna would have felt she was lost in some paradise. Even her plenitude of worries did not seem to matter anymore. She had just arrived and Dimo would not have her say any word about the real purpose of her visit. He had money to spend and could as well spoil her before she could get down to more serious business.

Minna spent the first two days lost in queenly pursuits. Dimo took her to restaurants where the bill was more than her monthly salary. They went to the cinema, shopped for clothes, strolled down sandy beaches though she would not dare show off any part of her body like other people she met, and drank rare imported wines.

Minna however turned down another outing for Sunday night, preferring to prepare supper by herself. That was the least she could do to pay back for all the luxuries. Besides it was her duty to cook for her brother-in-law.

It was over a meal of fresh fish from the Wouri, corn-fufu and vegetables – a combination of coastal and grassland staples – that Dimo felt he could engage his sister-in-law on findings he had made. 'I've got some news about Dorothy,' he said, after downing a cold glass of fresh mango juice that Minna had made. He spoke as if he was not serious.

Minna dropped the spoon she had picked from the vegetable dish and cocked her ear to one side.

'Eat your food. It is not appetite killing news.'

'Is she okay?'

'I think she is. I really didn't see her but the person who told me about her said she was fine.'

Minna looked at Dimo in expectation.

'She has joined a cult.'

'Cult or church?' Minna quickly cut in.

'Church if you like. I am really not sure what to call it.'



'If it's church then that's good,' said Minna with enthusiasm. 'I had told her that the only way she could get redemption was by joining some good born-again ministry. Even if some of these churches exaggerate, they have a way of bringing some discipline in the lives of otherwise indisciplined people.' It was difficult for Minna to fathom her sister kneeling prayerfully and invoking the name of God after all the evil she had done. Her sister had long abandoned church and had probably forgotten even the Lord's Prayer. It was anyway a positive development if indeed her sister had finally found solace in God.

'Well I don't know much about the church but I am not as enthusiastic as you are about the church. From the way my source spoke about it, I get the impression their religion is not similar to the one you and I know.'

Minna's appetite was gone. 'What do you mean?'

'Perhaps it would be best if we go there.'

'And I'll find Dorothy there?'

'I hope so.'

You don't sound convinced.'

Dimo served himself more fish. 'The man told me they don't like nosy relatives coming to disturb their members. He didn't explain further but it did make the whole thing sound sinister.'

'What are you trying to say, Dimo? That they may not let us into their church? That is against the law. Churches are public places and should be opened.'

'Well, the man didn't come out explicitly. I guess the only thing we can do is go there and see whether they will or will not let us in. If they don't, then we'll engage the security people and tell them Dorothy has been abducted and kept against her will.'

Minna sighed and clapped her hands. 'The way you are talking really frightens me. It's as if the church is not really a church but some baleful underground group.'

'I am not really sure what to conclude until I have seen the place for myself.'

'Do you know where it is located?' Minna, helped herself to a glass of juice.

'Yes. The man described it to me. In some remote part of Douala but I know the area well. Tomorrow you can bet I'll be going there.'

'We shall be going there,' Minna emphasised.

Dimo shook his head. 'I don't think it will be a good idea for you to come.'

'Why?'

'They worship very early in the morning. From five. Places would still be dark and the place can be very rough.'

'I understand your point, Dimo. But Dorothy is my sister and I may be the only one to ask the right questions.'

Dimo nodded. 'Then I'll ask a police friend to come along. We will have to do it quick. I have to be in the bank early tomorrow.'

'You are in-charge manager. But I am a bit curious. They worship on Monday? Is it a daily church?'

'One of their own days of worship I hear is Monday. That is why I am convinced it is some secret cult we are talking about.' Dimo eyed his brother's wife with deep empathy.

'My sister in a cult.' Minna covered her sad face with her hands and removed them almost immediately. 'But the man you talk to could not come out clean to you what their religion is about?'

'It was actually by chance that I met this man. It was one of your village people who directed me to him. I actually went to your village meeting here in Douala one Sunday and got this information. Now, the man himself whose name he refused to give, was even very reluctant to talk. I sensed that was because he owed the man who directed me to him that he gave the little information. I couldn't even entice him with money to say more. In fact we had to make a rendezvous over the phone to meet in the night behind one dark bar for him to feel free to talk. And he warned me to be very careful when I got there.'

'What exactly did he mean?'

'No idea except perhaps the fact that there could be danger. That's why I wouldn't like you to go.'

Minna shook her head with vigour. 'I am going Dimo. After all a policeman is going to accompany us. I have to do the best that I can to save my sister even if I don't like it. My conscience would be clear even if I don't succeed.'

Dimo rose from his chair. 'Get set for battle then. Thanks for a most memorable meal. I now understand why you keep hounding me to get married. I hope I can get someone who cooks just like this.'

'I know of many who can do even better,' said Minna, smiling. 'You are always looking for a way to dodge.'

'Okay, let me give you a promise. Give me a year, if I don't find one, then anyone that you and bro get for me, I'll accept.'

'Now you are talking.'

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Minna was wakened by the alarm on her mobile phone. She took a cool, refreshing shower and brewed a flask of coffee. After fixing a cup for herself, she plugged on the television and sat on the couch to watch the early morning news. She was not actually interested in the news but she needed some noise as distraction while waiting for her brother-in-law to come out. She was really prepared for battle. Her feet in trainers and for clothes, she wore a jean suit.

Dimo came out 4:45pm and was surprised to see Minna set and drinking coffee. He also wore trainers and a jean trousers and tee shirt combination. At Minna's insistence, he took his own cup and in a couple of minutes, they were on the road.

It was dawn and though not as dark as Minna had imagined. Dimo however had to keep the headlamps at full beam. The streets of the city were already busy with traffic and people specialised in the early morning trade. Bakeries were loading out bread to retailers while food sellers were already setting up their charcoal or saw dust fires on the sidewalks.

Dimo stopped at the house of the policeman only to be told that he had been called in the night to help out some colleagues who had gone to some crime scene. Dimo was disappointed and Minna knew what he was going to say. She pulled the words out of his tongue before he could say them. 'No, I am not going back. After all, one dies only once.'

'If you say so *mon commandant*. Your husband should not blame me if something happens to you.'

'I have already told him and nothing is going to happen.'

'*Allons-y alors.*'

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In ten minutes, there were on the outskirts of Douala, in a new spontaneous quarter of Ndogpassi that a couple of years before used to be covered by dense forest. Population explosion and poverty had pushed poorer people to pitch rough timber shacks for their families here, to escape exorbitant rental rates in the city proper. Wealthier citizens had later followed and started staking more modern blockhouses. It was common to find elegant villas juxtaposed with traditional calabot dwellings.

In spite of the constant standing pools in this coastal territory, and the total absence of public utilities, thousands called this place home and the smarter ones had even begun to eke out their living from the very area. Provision stores, garages, carpentry shops and eating-houses had sprung up everywhere.

The road, which Dimo took, was very muddy and slippery despite evidence of community effort at road maintenance. The car however had four-wheel drive facility. Dimo could therefore make it to the end of some cul-de-sac, which was hemmed in by some large building. Dimo parked the car by some cluster of calabot houses and switched off his headlamps. 'Here we are,' he breathed and surveyed the area through the

windscreen. Places had brightened up more and Dimo could see some individuals trickling into the large building.

The building did not give much to write home about. It was made up of timber poles and planks stacked in any order, but standing. It looked old and abandoned and indeed eerie for immediately behind were huge towering trees that made the area even darker. The roof consisted of metal sheets of all ages and sizes and it appeared they were held simply by huge stones and long tree trunks.

The houses where Dimo had parked had lights but from this building, there wasn't the tiniest flicker of electric light. 'It's an abandoned saw mill,' said Dimo to Minna as if he had read the question in her mind. He got out of the car.

Minna's heart was beating fast. It was indeed strange to think that such a creepy place could be connected with her sister.

'I have a gun. Don't be afraid.' Dimo whispered to her through the door.

Minna shot him with popped out eyes. 'What if they have to search you?'

'I'll take my chances.'

Minna slapped her forehead. 'No Dimo. If they see the gun on you, they would think you are a threat and that may put us in more danger. Let us just go empty handed and if they try to question us, we tell them we are interested in joining and so came to find out modalities.'

'I am not going to take the chance.'

'Trust me here Dimo. I am the woman and when they see me with you, they would not feel as threatened as if you went alone. Women are often given the benefit of the doubt, you know.'

'Someone is approaching,' Dimo ventroliquisd, snatching the gun from his pocket and handing it to Minna to hide under her seat. Minna did as naturally as possible. The man who was coming in quick strides on the side where Dimo stood, made a sharp turn when he noticed Dimo and crossed to the other side of the road.

The man walked, looking straight ahead and immediately he was some clear distance away, he vanished into the bush.

'Time we went,' breathed Dimo. Minna immediately came out of the car, wound up the glass and went after Dimo. They went at gradual pace but keeping alert. They greeted some people who had come out of the building but the people did not utter a word. They simply bowed their heads in a Far Eastern fashion and went on in quick dignified strides. Minna could not see any danger in all that. The people rather looked polite though the silence was unsettling.

After mounting some three steps, they entered the building. It was a large rectangular space with candles burning from the four angles. Up some raised stage were three white-robed individuals standing behind a small table, their heads rising and falling to a constant rhythm. In front of them were some twenty odd individuals, a majority of them in similar white robes. They were on their knees in well spaced out positions, all waving outstretched hands in the air. It was difficult to distinguish women from men for they all had clean-shaven heads.

Minna and Dimo strolled to the back of the building and no one turned to look at them. The adherents kept humming some tune that followed the rhythm of the dancing heads on the stage. After some minutes, they all got up and started spinning clockwise, then anticlockwise, still humming the same tune.

Then the person at the centre on the stage made a long amen and the crowd all responded amen, bowing then embracing each other with flashing smiles. No one however spoke. No one looked directly at the intruders. They simply began slipping out of the building still ignoring the strangers.

When all the adherents had gone out leaving only the individuals on stage, the intruders approached the stage. The trio were obviously some kind of leaders. They did not look directly at Minna and Dimo and still behaved as if they were concentrating on their prayers

when Dimo placed a foot on the stage. It was a makeshift wooden stage. 'Good morning,' Dimo greeted but nobody responded.

*'Nous cherchons une dame, s'il vous plait.'*

One of the leaders walked off the stage and went out of the door.

*'Ma petite soeur,'* added Minna as if crying, in heavy accented French.

There was still no response.

The second leader, head bowed, went out of the door like the other colleague.

*'Vous cherchez?'* a polite feminine voice broke from the remaining white-robed figure. She wrapped some cloth over her mouth and pulled a hood over her head.

'Dorothy!' Minna said without thinking.

*'Quoi?'* said the woman, sharply. The polite gentleness was no longer there.

'Dorothy, stop all this nonsense and let's get out of here.'

*'De quoi parlez-vous?'* asked the woman in a voice that gave a hint of fear. She removed the hood from her head and pulled away the cloth over her mouth. 'Who is Dorothy?' The woman spoke with a nervous quiver and it was obvious English was not a language she was very used to.

The voice was strange and Minna could see the face better. Minna also knew she had touched a raw nerve and wished she had practised her French more so she could interrogate the woman deeper. She was certain the woman would use her ignorance of the English language not to respond. But all of a sudden, Minna was so gripped by self-consciousness that even the little French she knew deserted her. She splashed it out in English, taking time to pronounce each word. 'Can you tell my sister Dorothy that her mother is dead?'

'I don't know her and excuse me, I have to close the church house.'

'Please madam,' Dimo entreated, 'we like this church and we wanted to find out how we could become new members.'

That was cheap, Minna thought and Minna would have slapped him if he was a child. The woman put back her hood and mouth cover then bowed her head. The message was clear enough. The conversation was over. She left the stage, blew out all the candles and stood by the door waiting for the intruders to leave. Dimo and Minna went out to a bright morning. Besides the lead woman, the next person in sight was a young man riding away on a bicycle. Everybody had disappeared.

The hooded woman stood on the steps and watched until Dimo turned the car in the opposite direction.

'Let me have the gun,' said Dimo to Minna.

Minna sent her hand under the chair and wanted to curse Dimo for his tactless question which she was certain had caused the woman not to be more cooperative. Minna's hand went everywhere. She touched nothing but the carpet. 'It's not there,' she said to Dimo with frightened eyes.

'What do you mean it's not there?' Dimo stopped the car and came out to Minna's side. Minna came out. Dimo looked under the seat, under his own seat and under the back seat. There was no trace of the gun. As he came back towards his own side, he stopped and looked at the building. The hooded woman was no longer there. 'Let's get out of here fast.'

'I don't think you'll be going back on Wednesday,' Dimo said to Minna as he manoeuvred the car as fast as he could over the nasty road.

'I was just about to tell you that I was going to phone my Principal and beg him to give me the rest of the week. I have practically covered the entire program with my exam students.'

'These people really know something,' Dimo was breathing fast. You saw the way that woman's face shot up when you mentioned the name Dorothy. Her eyes almost jumped out of her face.'

'I thought I was the only one who noticed. And I really thought it was Dorothy.'

'Who do these people think they are? I am going to get my security friends and we are

going to get to the bottom of this. I am sure this is the “they” that Dorothy referred to in her letter.’

‘It must be,’ said Minna happy about her brother-in-law’s mounting passion. That was the attitude that was necessary at this stage. She needed all the help he could give her.

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Around ten the following morning, Dimo panted into the parlour where Minna was sitting all by herself, trying to prepare some notes that she would present to her students at the earliest opportunity. ‘Change into some travelling gear let’s go.’

Minna did not ask any question but went in straight and changed, this time into a blue flowery frock that was easy on her body. She had been eagerly waiting for this call since they returned from the unpleasant church. Dimo remained in the simple safari suit he had put on in the morning.

‘That man who talked to me, they say he is dead,’ said Dimo with a creased up face as Minna descended into the parlour.

Minna froze on the spot. ‘And it’s not natural?’

‘The police suspect foul play. They found him hanging from his ceiling this morning. Some neighbours claimed it was suicide. According to the neighbours, the man could not bear the constant pressure from creditors. The police however think otherwise. The man had debts quite all right but it wasn’t to the level where he would kill himself. He had agreed with the creditors on rescheduling payments and he had been respecting the agreement to a very large extent. It appears they killed the man for speaking to me. That is what my police friend thinks.’

‘And how could they have known he spoke to you?’

‘It beats me. But if their intention was to frighten me, then they didn’t succeed. They have rather aroused the devil in me. I am going to get Dorothy.’ Dimo wanted to say more but kept quiet and bowed his head. ‘My fear is you.’ He threw his back against the wall by the main door.

‘They can’t touch me,’ said Minna, moving towards the door and pushing the handbag further over her shoulder. ‘So where are we heading?’

Dimo looked at her with uncertainty. She ignored the look and went out to the veranda. ‘To Mbanga,’ Dimo said rather weakly and went after Minna.

‘Why not eat something first before going. The houseboy is in the kitchen.’ Minna made to go back into the house.

‘No no. No food now. All that heavy breakfast you gave me has not digested.’

In an hour, they were at the western edge of Douala on their way to Mbanga, a railway junction town some forty kilometres away. ‘When we get there, you have to stick very close to me,’ said Dimo, hunched over the wheel and throttling at speeds between a hundred and a hundred and twenty.

Minna nodded with a taut face. She was not much at ease with the speed but dared not utter a word. She did not want her brother-in-law to know she was scared, which could make him send her back to the house. ‘You have not exactly told me why we are going but to Mbanga?’

‘The police friend I told you about did carry out some investigations that led him all the way to Mbanga. Of course I had to fund the investigation. His boss who should normally fund such an operation doesn’t know. Discretion is the word. My friend went there with another colleague and this morning they called me from Mbanga asking me to come with you.’

‘I am sorry, Dimo for putting you through all this for me. You shouldn’t be wasting your money like this. I feel terribly guilty.’

‘You shouldn’t be. I am just doing my brother’s job. He is going to pay me back anyway. I hear he is having some big contract. I’ll get back my cash.’

‘If that will even be enough to pay back.’

'At least it will be a start. You don't have to worry yourself. Let's just get there and see what the police guys have got for us.'

'You are such a nice man Dimo and you are wasting it on single-hood. A good woman and lovely children would make excellent use of this niceness.'

'You never give up, Minna. I am no Mr Nice. Don't mind all these. I am only pretending.'

Minna chuckled in her hands. 'Don't flatter yourself. It doesn't become you.'

Mbanga was under a torrid midday sun when they arrived. A three-wagon train was lazily into the station opposite to which they stopped. Dimo forked out his cell phone from his pocket and dialled. Minna looked on expectantly as he made a brief conversation. 'My police friend,' he told her. After making a u-turn and at the point where rail lines crossed the road, he branched off into an earth road. Brown, volcanic gravel crunched under the tyres as Dimo fought to skirt around puddles and outcrops of rocks on the road.

They stopped at some house by the road. A huge man with a very generous mid-section greeted them. They shook hands with the man who then led them into a dusty room with the only furniture being a set of clothes rack on the wall. The man removed two white robes from the rack and handed to them. Minna wanted to ask what was going on but a finger on the man's lips warned her to stay quiet. Following another quiet gesture from the man, Dimo and Minna threw the robes over their clothes.

'Do exactly like the crowd,' the big man whispered. 'I'll be behind you. When the session ends, we move towards the stage and if you can identify your sister, you tell me.'

Minna nodded and followed Dimo back to the car. She felt ridiculous in the robe but understood why she had to put it on.

In ten minutes, they emerged on the edge of what appeared to be a football field. Here was gathered quite a crowd of people. Dimo parked to one side where there were a couple of other cars. They came out to be greeted by frenzied choruses of amens and alleluias. People were raising their hands high and the majority were dressed in white robes.

Minna and Dimo immediately joined the crowd as the choruses came to an abrupt end. Total silence took hold. Then in an almost choreographed wave, everybody went down on their knees, bowing their heads and keeping their arms outstretched. It was like a human ocean with the break being a dozen of white robed people standing on some platform at the far end, whipping their heads up and down.

The whole crowd soon began to hum the very tune Minna had heard at the Ndogpassi church house. Minna and Dimo joined in, making sure they did not raise their voice to the level where the next persons could hear. They were on their knees for close to ten minutes, humming and raising their hands then keeping silence.

Minna soon began to feel biting cramps in her legs and would have loved to run away. Luckily for her, the crowd soon rose to their feet and she did the same to much relief. A moment later, they were back on their knees for another ten minutes. The process was repeated another three times before a lone voice burst from the speakers with a long alleluia. The crowd gave a thunderous amen and everyone got up and they started embracing each other, all in silence.

Worshippers started dispersing as Minna and Dimo inched gradually towards the platform. When they were just a couple of metres close to the platform, the big man whispered to Minna to try and identify her sister. Minna surveyed the faces thoroughly. This time there was no hood or mouth cover and lighting was one hundred percent good. Minna could distinguish some women from men in spite of the fact that all on the platform had bare, shiny skulls. She could make out the breast outlines and the feminine hand gestures. But none of the faces carried any resemblance to that of her sister.

'Even if you suspect one of them is her, tell me,' the man whispered again. Minna examined again and shook her head vehemently.

'Let's go then,' ordered the man. Minna and Dimo immediately went after the man. They entered the car and after they had wound up the tinted glasses, they took off their

robes. Minna almost laughed. But it was no laughing matter and she held her jaws firm.

Dimo did not waste any time to thrust the car on the road. The adherents walked in quiet respectable files on both sides of the road, looking only ahead and not speaking to each other. Dimo had to slow down in respect of the dignified pedestrians who appeared filled with whatever spiritual food they had just been blessed with.

Immediately he was on the main road, Dimo raised the speed and drove straight to a hotel. In the lobby, there was the big man in police uniform beckoning at them to join him over in an isolated corner of the lobby.

'This is Officer Michael, my friend.' Dimo did the introduction. The big man rose and offered a seat next to him to Minna.

After taking their orders of drinks and plantain chips, Officer Michael went down to business. 'Your sister is a senior person in this movement.'

Minna was astounded. Dorothy had never been senior in anything. 'How senior?'

'Don't laugh,' the officer warned. 'First Deaconess of the Alpha and Omega Temple.'

Minna could not hold it. She burst out laughing, closing her mouth.

'I warned you,' said the officer and the two men joined in laughing.

'We are laughing like this but it is a very serious matter,' went the big man after the laughter had died down. 'I asked that you come over here thinking your sister might actually be here. Reliable information however holds that your sister was sent up north of the country to fish for more followers. I wanted to confirm that by having you coming here to testify that you could not identify her on that platform. She was here two weeks ago and I imagined that she might not have left so abruptly. As a matter of fact, she is up north.'

'Exactly where?' muted Minna.

'Somewhere close to Chad.'

'But why that far?'

'It seems that is where the headquarters of this movement is. I would advise you to just forget about her. It is a movement where once you have gone deep, you forget you ever had a family. They use hypnotic means or some other mystical charms to transform you into a new, really born-again person.'

'Mike, it all sounds like some mad fiction,' Dimo entered.

'Believe you me, it is no mad fiction but mad reality. Our headquarters started investigating this group some two years back but it appears someone very high up was unhappy and stopped all the investigation. You know, ever since they liberated the laws on religion, we have all kinds of them in the country. And there is very little you can do about them legally unless they actually flout the law.'

'But they have flouted the law by abducting my sister,' protested Minna.

'No evidence,' said the man in uniform with glumly. 'If we arrest your sister and she says openly that it was her free choice then your case is doomed.'

'I know my sister officer. She could not have entered this kind of thing with her own free will. And you know what makes the whole thing so confusing? She had a child just of recent, stole her way to my place and dumped the child on my veranda at night. Why would this people who do not want to let her get away allow her to surrender her child to an outsider? One would expect them to keep the child and raise him as one of theirs.'

'Dimo told me about the child. The simple answer is, I don't know. Why they had to treat the child the way they did beats me. Perhaps, the child is not actually your sister's.'

That cut the breath out of Minna. She held her chest, her mouth agape.

'Yes it is possible,' said the Officer with emphasis. 'Think about it.'

'No sir,' said Minna slowly but firmly, shaking her head. 'Ngam is my sister's child. The resemblance is there. My mother assured me before she died. She was the one who even urged me to take the child. She had been communicating with Dorothy somehow.' Minna tried to show conviction but deep within her had been sown seeds of uncertainty.

Well,' the officer raised his hands in despair. 'I don't know what more to say. You know in these things, you can never be one hundred percent sure. The investigation however



would go on and all I can promise now is that if I get any information, you'll be the first to know.

Minna did not hear assurance in the voice and she could tell the man was disappointed and if not, fed up. He had not lived up to the expectations of his friend Dimo – finding Dorothy. But he wanted to drop the issue, which seemed either to be taking him nowhere or too complicated.

Minna however thanked the man for his efforts even though he had left more questions than answers in her mind. Dimo himself seemed demoralised that he had not been able to fulfil his sister-in-law's wishes. He promised however to keep his ears on the ground.

Minna was sitting at the edge of a table that stood in front of over a hundred students in a hall where they were writing the last examination paper. She was a very strict invigilator and the students were never happy when she was the one invigilating. She would not even allow them to breath, the students used to complain. But it was exactly for her strictness that examination officials often insisted that she handled the difficult examination halls.

Five minutes to the end of the session, one of the external exam officials entered the hall and gave her a letter. He said the man who brought the letter said it was an emergency. Minna tore open an envelope, which revealed a dirty scrap of paper. On it was written a single sentence in a scruffy handwriting.

*Stop looking for Dorothy and warn your brother-in-law to mind his own business.*

There was no sender and no address. Minna felt gas bubbles explode in her stomach and sudden pressure down her groin. She was not going to lose control, she tried to tell herself. But her heart was flying out of control. She fisted the paper in one hand and ran after the official who had brought the letter and pleaded with him to stand in for her so she could run to the toilet.

The first shot spurted out as she touched the door into the staff toilet. She groaned when she saw the mess she had caused on herself only after she had completely released the pressure. She was however thankful that there was no external sign of wetness on her clothes.

After using some tissue to dab off the mess, she literally ran back to her examination hall. She tried to impose her ever rigorous methods but all the students could see she had lost her focus. One moment she would be striding between the rows, warning the students with her eyes and presence. The next moment, she would be moping with that distant look, nervous and almost shaking. The weak but determined students took advantage of the situation to copy from the clever ones.

The note had really raised her temperature to boiling point. She barely managed to fulfil the end of examination formalities like packaging scripts and filling forms. She was out of the hall immediately the external exam official collected her package. So abrupt was her departure that the official stopped to stare at her.

Minna ran to an isolated corner of the campus and called her brother-in-law.

‘You got a letter too?’ was the first thing Dimo said before she could even say hello.

‘You had one and you didn’t call me?’

‘It was of no consequence. Such things don’t scare me. Can you read it for me?’

Minna thought he was joking but read the note.

‘Empty threats Minna.’

‘But I am scared Dimo.’

‘Don’t be Minna. Trust me. The people are not yet there in Bamenda and probably might never come there. You people over there are too outspoken and they don’t like that. They would never camp there. They probably sent one of their bolder scouts to hand the letter to you. I have serious connections with the security who tell me all these things. These people are just trying to kill your determination to look for your sister who is a very valuable asset to them.’

Minna held her breath and pulled away the phone from her ear briefly. ‘Dimo, I have never in my life got this kind of letter before. I am not going to let Dorothy’s mindless adventures destroy me and my family.’

‘Just what those imbeciles want to hear. We can’t give them that comfort Minna. They

are common criminals even if they have some godfathers at the top. Good people have to prevail and that is what I intend to do Minna. Well, to keep your mind at rest, I am going to make them know that you have given up and every time you call me, say no word about the issue. In fact if you ever have any anonymous call, tell whoever called that you have given up. I know by now, they have your number. Don't change it. They would think you are trying to play games.'

'Now I am even more scared than before. They have my number? How? Oh God Dimo, let's drop the whole issue and live our lives. After all keeping Ngam is more than enough service for my sister.'

Minna heard a sigh of frustration from the other side. 'Tell you what Minna. I am going to draw away all their attention on me and keep you out. I can assure you that they are the ones who are scared. My friends are getting closer to their penalty zone. To prove the point, the police recovered my gun.'

Minna held her chest. 'From who? They caught the person?'

'Not really. It appears they threatened the people and they dropped the gun around where we parked the car. Just to give the police the impression that we dropped it.'

The phone almost dropped out of Minna's hand. 'And what did the police believe?'

'Just what I have told you. The people panicked and had to do everything to get the police off their backs. I have all the information my dear wife. Don't worry. I am bundling them into a tight conner. I am more than their equal. You've received just one letter. I received the fourth one yesterday. This is just to tell you their real target is me.'

'Fourth and you could not tell me?'

Dimo laughed then hesitated. 'I told you it's no big deal. I have got worse threats than these. Well, I told big bro everything and warned him not to tell you. I knew you were going to be scared. This conversation has borne me out.'

'What do you expect of me after receiving such a letter? The first ever of its kind? These brigands certainly don't want us poking our noses in things which they want to keep very underground.' Minna hit a fly that had landed on her nose. 'Did you find out why my sister is a much cherished member? I can bet my life that Dorothy can never be a cherished member in anything positive.'

'People do change oh, Minna. And sometimes at moments you least expected. This however is not to say Dorothy is in something positive. I really haven't found out why she is special. I guess she has real super qualities to fish for very useful converts which I think includes rich and powerful men.'

Minna shook her head with revulsion. 'Yes that sounds like my sister. No man on this earth can slip through her fingers. That means she likes where she is. Dimo, drop the investigation. Let Dorothy be. She is enjoying herself, I am sure of that. And anyway, if we don't ever see her again, it is not going to be the end of the world. She made her bed and she is lying on it and laughing at us. We can't force her to be what she doesn't want to be.'

'No way Minna,' went Dimo strongly. 'Dorothy may have special status but she didn't become part of this evil group out of her own volition. That is very clear. I know she slipped somehow and fell in the trap. What exactly happened, I haven't yet been able to find out. But I know she didn't go there with her eyes open. I am going to get to the bottom of this Minna. I hate people who take advantage of vulnerable people. Dorothy was vulnerable and they took advantage of her.'

Minna was shaken by the passion in her brother-in-law's voice. This was not his war but he was sounding like the general at the front line. 'Dimo, I very much want my sister back but I am not going to destroy other innocent lives just because of her. She is not altogether innocent. If she was, she would have at least given us some indication why she came and dumped her child and vamoosed.'

Minna could sense some breath of doubt coming from the other side. 'Maybe you are right. But I still have to dig deeper to find out the total truth. And if I get to discover that what you are suggesting is true, I'll withdraw. I can't forget what your sister used to do for

me when I was living with you people. We used to have our quarrels but she used to help me with my clothes when I had tight schedules in school. And she always used to cover for me when I did silly things.'

Minna laughed, following the guilty one that came over the phone. She knew there used to be some fishy goings-on between her sister and Dimo but had never thought it could have gone deep to the point where Dimo should feel indebted. She knew that the two of them were enemies. 'So this is pay back time?'

'We are family Min, and I should care about her.'

'Okay, sir. But just be careful. One other thing Dimo. Do you think these people may also be after the child? Wanting him back?'

'You know I never thought about that?' Dimo said as if alarmed. 'I think not. They probably want the child out of the way in order to get Dorothy to slave for them unhindered.'

This was the voice of one who was thinking aloud, Minna resolved and decided to let that be for the time. Besides her credit was exhausted and the line was cut off. She promised herself however that she was going to be more careful about Ngam. If the child should disappear from her hands, it would be scandalous. Her father and his crew would make sure she would regret it for life.

She squeezed the paper in her hand but thought better of it and flung it into her handbag. She still did not feel at ease in spite of her brother-in-law's assurance. Even if she was going to be out of danger, it might not be the case with Dimo. Bearing the brunt alone might entail paying a very heavy price. That was not going to sit well in her already battered conscience. Dorothy had already messed up the whole family. Now, Minna in turn was going to endanger Dimo's life for the sake of the very Dorothy. There was just no drop of fairness in all this.

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When Minna got to the house, the first person she saw was her aunt. Her heartbeat trebled. She could smell trouble. Her aunt would not just come all the way from Widikum like that without any warning. Minna tried to read a clue on her aunt's face even as they embraced. The face was as bland as Minna had ever known it.

'Where are the children?' Minna asked in a ploy to leave the onus on her aunt to break her bag of trouble.

'Akwen just went out with her sisters to see off a friend and I hear Rogers was writing his last paper. You didn't come with him?'

'That one who says I should stop babying him?' Minna waved a hand and collapsed on the couch next to her aunt. 'He thinks having written his last paper, that makes him an independent man. I left him with his friends. What about Ngam?'

'Sleeping. I just put him to bed.'

'You, Auntie? Where is Manka?'

Auntie Aggie forced air through her nose and shrugged her shoulders. Minna knew some bad news was coming. Auntie Aggie began by raising her hands. 'I didn't come here to create problems in your home, God knows that. Akwen and her sisters can bear me witness.'

'What is it, Auntie?' Minna said with some irritation. She was already too tense as it was.

'A couple of minutes after I got here, a woman entered claiming she was Manka's mother. I don't know her and the children too claimed they didn't know her. Anyway, Manka confirmed that it was her mother. Following my orders, the woman was served some food and even some wine from the fridge. After eating, she came and met us on the front yard. I was conversing with the girls and she came and said she wanted to talk to me alone.'

'Talk to you?' Minna was surprised. 'But you don't know her or do you?'

'I have never met that woman in my life. Then I told her I was not a member of the

house. That she should talk to Akwen if it was very important.' Auntie Aggie looked at Minna hoping she had done well thus far.

Minna nodded more out of impatience to hear it all than acknowledging proper behaviour.

'She said she was going to talk to Akwen and me. I said okay. She then explained that she wanted to come and find out under what terms you people were keeping Manka.'

Minna clapped her hands in surprise. 'But my husband settled that with her long before he could even be permitted to take Manka. He gave money to her and the husband. Soap, oil and all the rest. What did she want? More money?'

'Well, I don't know. I asked her to wait for you to come back but she said she was in a hurry to go back. Akwen had to go to a call box to phone you. But it appears your phone was off.'

'Yes I was invigilating and as a rule, the phone must be off.' Minna's face had developed ugly frown lines.

'Akwen said Tetang had gone out of town on a tour and couldn't be reached either by phone.'

Minna nodded.

'The woman said she was going to take her daughter away and that if you people still needed her, you should meet her in the village and make a signed agreement before you can take her daughter back. I tried to pressure her to wait to no avail. She seemed really upset.'

'Balluck!' Minna clapped her hands again. 'Dey go beg monkey for chop banana. What ingratitude, Auntie! This is a woman whose son almost did not register for his advanced levels until my husband made the money available. Tetang paid all the fees and even gave some chunk of money for the woman to start the palm oil trade.'

Tetang was going to use my family in Widikum to help the woman. The idiot squandered the money. Tetang didn't even mind. We agreed that we were going to set up Manka in the palm oil business. It is a very lucrative sector especially when you have privileged suppliers as Manka was going to have. What kind of ungrateful world is this? Let her go and good riddance.'

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Minna rose angrily and went into her bedroom without excusing herself. She fell on the bed and closed her eyes with her hands. It was so easy to say good riddance but Manka had been a Godsend. A good and dutiful girl. That kind of girl whom every working wife and mother would kill to keep in their homes.

With Manka, Minna almost forgot she had domestic duties. She even forgot that Ngam was a responsibility that could have cost her, her job. Perhaps she should do as the woman demanded. Go back and offer whatever she wanted and get Manka to come back.

How was Minna going to cope? Who would take care of Ngam? Akwen would be going to her paternal grandmother for holidays. Rogers and Rita would be off to Douala where Dimo had already prepared everything for their coming. They had already paid for a government sponsored holiday camp for Tiffuh. The long holiday was the best time for Minna to make some extra money for the family by teaching in some adult training centres. Tetang was soon going to be too busy with the contract to have any time for the house.

Dorothy. How Minna hated her. Disrupting Minna's carefully planned life. It was not in a day that Minna had built and now when she was supposed to be reaping the fruits, comes her lazy, self-centred sister to foist a child on her. Minna turned over, closing her face on the bed. Look at all the money and time she had spent looking for Dorothy and what was she getting in the end? Dorothy's baby to tie her down forever and threatening letters.

Who was going to look after Ngam? And now with the threat of possible kidnapping hanging over him, Minna had to ensure the child was safe twenty-four hours round the clock. Perhaps she could send him off to some well-secured orphanage. Her family would mock at her. They would cast all kind of aspersions on her.

She was the one who had refused to leave the child back in the village. To hear that she had finally thrown the child to an orphanage, her father would declare to the whole wide world that his daughter was plain wicked. There was no way she could send that child to some orphanage. Besides, she would not sleep well with her conscience for just one night.

Minna suddenly leapt up from the bed. A wicked smile flashed across her face. There was the solution. Just under her very roof. She ran out of the room and joined her aunt who was now lying on the mowed lawn under the plum tree. 'Auntie, you are not going to go back to Widikum,' Minna said in her most seductive voice.

'I beg your pardon,' retorted her aunt as if she had just been hit by bad news. Both women sat with their legs stretched out.

'You are going to run away from all the insults I know you are getting and live with us.'

Auntie Aggie laughed. 'You are joking, right?'

'Why should I be joking? I am dead serious. There is nothing for you in that boring place especially now that Ma is not there. I know all you are getting are insults and isolation.'

'Whatever gave you that impression? No way little sister. I know what is inside your mind but if it is going to involve me, it is not going to be that way.'

'I don't know what you are talking about Auntie.' Minna was genuinely perplexed.

'I can read you like a book Minna. I went to school oh? I would love to take care of Ngam but that will not be here. That will be in Widikum.'

Minna could not believe it. 'But Widikum is not your village, Auntie. And you are there alone.'

'Says who? I have lived in Widikum with your mother for a long time so it is as much my village as any other village. I have planted my roots there deep, Minna.'

Minna could see some light sparkling in her aunt's eyes and it frightened her. 'Auntie is there something you want to tell me. Dis one wey you dey talk like new bride so.'

Auntie Aggie made a wry smile, looking at the ground.

'Auntie don't tell me. If I didn't know you I would say there is a man.'

Auntie Aggie shot at her niece with a serious look. 'Yes there is.'

Minna laughed. 'That is an expensive joke, Auntie. Just stop am ah beg.'

'This is no joking matter, Minna.'

Minna saw the seriousness on her aunt's face and switched off her smile. 'That there's a man in your life?'

'That's one of the reasons why I am here. And if you are going to make me look a fool, I think I better go back.'

Minna stood up, raising her hands in apology. 'Auntie you are really serious? A man wants to marry you?' Minna walked and hit the trunk of the tree with a fist and came back. 'And what part do I have to play in this?'

'My own family. You are the only reliable family I have left since Ma died. If I go back to Wum, I would not live in peace. I ran away from them when my husband died. His family wanted me to marry my husband's younger brother. And my own people were even in support of that.'

'Some people haven't realised that the world has moved since they were born?' said Minna, feeling for her aunt.

'I'm telling you Minna. I won't go back there. Not while I am alive. I know if they hear about this man, they would go mad and could even put juju on me. I just came to tell you, not that you have anything particular to do. I want you to know with the intention that when next time you visit or somebody comes to tell you, you wouldn't be shocked. The man makes me happy sister.' There was this hopeful grin on Auntie Aggie's face.

Minna closed her mouth. She was still dying for a laugh but she dared not make her aunt more miserable than she already looked. This was an aunt who would support her through thick and thin. She just had to stand by her. 'Auntie you are approaching fifty and what are you going to do about children?'

'The man already has fifteen.'

'Fifteen? A polygamist! You saw what happened to Ma and you want to get inside a similar thing with your eyes opened?'

'His first wife died and his second wife is crippled. She can't do anything. It will be okay, I can assure you. I am in good terms with her.'

'What if the children reject you?'

'Have you forgotten your Auntie, Minna? I know how to handle them. Don't worry. Just be happy for me Minna and give me your support.'

Auntie, I'll never do anything to jeopardise your happiness. If that man makes you happy, so be it. I am sure this thing started going on right under Ma's nose.' Minna sat back on the grass.

Auntie Aggie laughed. 'She would have killed me if she had found out.'

'Are you going to marry him officially?'

'Nothing as fancy as that. We are just going to be living together. I am going to move into his compound very soon.'

Minna was finding it difficult to accept it. A bride at menopausal age? 'And what does Pa say about all this?'

'He has no problem with it. He actually encouraged me.'

Minna wanted to curse and raise all kinds of questions. But she could not afford to hurt her aunt who was only eager to win her support. 'You have my support Auntie but tell that randy man to send my part of the bride price.'

Auntie Aggie got up and embraced her niece. 'This means much to me.' There were tears coming down her face.

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'Tell me then, what was the other reason for your coming here?' asked Minna as both women headed back into the house.

'Ngam.'

There was an explosion in Minna's chest. 'What about Ngam?'

'Our people from Wum came to Widikum demanding that Ngam be sent to them for some traditional rites. You know Ngam is our father's successor. They didn't know you had taken him back. Ma had told them about Ngam and her wish to have him crowned the successor at the earliest possible time.'

Minna breathed in partial relief. 'But I thought Ma had said it was going to be Rogers?' Minna said out of jealousy and anger.

'Don't be angry Minna. That was the last wish of a dying woman. I can't lie. She actually said it and said so to one of our brothers who came visiting before she died.' Minna leaned against the wall by the internal kitchen while her aunt sat on one of the dining chairs.

'Ma hated me I know but did she have to transfer it to my children? How could she designate Ngam the successor of her father when the child has no father? And Rogers is her first grandson.'

'You are the one who named that child Ngam. Not Ma. Remember you told her that he was your grandfather. You see, in actual fact, Ma just respected what you did. She told me and I couldn't disagree with her. I had never known Rogers was one of the possible candidates.'

'Anyway, it doesn't matter.' Minna whipped her hand in the air and went into the kitchen. 'Dis traditional things dem self. With all the witchcraft and mystical things. They could even harm my son.'

'I heard that,' Auntie Aggie shouted from the dining room. 'We don't joke with tradition like that. Just be glad that your grandfather would at last find rest where he went to.'

Minna kept quiet, concentrating instead on serving herself with a glass of water. She had an ambiguous mind about certain customs. The prestige that went with titles was okay



but the responsibilities, which were sometimes blemished with worries about witchcraft often frightened her. 'Now tell me Auntie, what pleasure does the new bride want out of my kitchen?'

'Meat and lots of it.'

'Go and tell your husband I am not a hunter.'

Both women laughed but Minna's was strained. She still had to determine what she was going to do with the damn Ngam. Her mind had also not settled down after the alarming discussion she had just had with Dimo.

'Would you allow me take Ngam along to Widikum?'

Minna would have loved to shout yes but she was not certain about the child's position in her aunt's new home. Would he not be more vulnerable to abduction in Widikum? Minna had to be more careful. Besides, she would only be giving more fodder for people back at home to laugh at her that she could not cope with the child. Minna limped out of the kitchen to join her aunt. 'I'll think about it and tell you later.'

'What's there to think about? I know there will be nobody to look after him here. It wouldn't be any problem in my new situation if that is what is worrying you.'

'It isn't that. I'll get somebody to look after him.' Minna spoke without any conviction. No, she could not bear the shame of sending the child back to Widikum. 'What about the child's enthronement?'

'I nearly forgot. I described your house to them. Just be expecting them anytime.'

'You shouldn't have, Auntie. I don't have money now to give them. Ma's funeral drained us completely and we are yet to recover.'

Auntie Aggie shrugged her shoulders. 'You will have to beg, borrow or steal. You know now? When they are coming to the home of a daughter of substance, they expect to be treated like dignitaries. I would start saving if I were you.'

'I now see. You plotted with them. Well now that you've told me, I'll keep somebody in Wum to be monitoring. If I hear they are coming, I'll immediately send Ngam to you and tell them to move straight to Widikum. If your new guy doesn't pay heaven and earth as bride price to them, they will drag you screaming and kicking out and back to misery in your father's compound. I will have the last laugh.'

'I beg oh, Minna. My guy is very poor but I love him.'

In spite of word that Minna had sent around, and several efforts visiting some villages to get a new maid, Minna did not succeed. Tetang even had to swallow his pride and go back to negotiate to take back Manka. There in the village he discovered his cousin had taken back her daughter for good. The woman needed labour for her many farms and Manka apparently was her most hardworking daughter.

Minna had no choice but to ditch the holiday teaching. This was the first time in six years that she was not going to offer a service where she had become a reliable asset. She was always a sure candidate to be called up among thousands of teachers who often applied. She was now going to forfeit this opportunity forever for not respecting the invitation this time around. All because of one child that was not hers.

It was not just the money that she was going to miss. It was also the chance to be useful to her society in her spare time. It was kind of rewarding to transform adults who had never seen the four walls of a classroom into literate citizens, giving them a better potential to help themselves and their society. She was not the kind of person to use the holidays just just lazing around.

But taking care of Ngam all by herself was no lazing around. Manka had spared her the onerous trouble involved in taking care of an infant since they last came back from Widikum. Her task had been limited to finding out whether the child was well-fed, well-clothed and healthy. The minute-by-minute, nitty-gritty stuff was handled by the ever-diligent Manka. Here was Minna faced by a reality she was little prepared for.

The experience that she had had during that first phase when Ngam just appeared, did not prepare her well for this phase. During that period, her children used to help her after school. Now she was not going to have any such help. All the children had already gone for holidays and Tetang was a busy architect who came back only late and understandably, very tired.

The saving grace however was that Ngam had matured and had cultivated better manners. He was no longer choosy about what to eat. He didn't cry much and had developed some bit of autonomy by being able to creep all over the place and even attempting to stand. All Minna had to do was keep away harmful objects and Ngam would be busy surveying the place, giving her the chance to cook or clean.

Her real agony came from the fact that she had become virtually a prisoner. She could not go anywhere or otherwise, she would have to carry the child around. She had to stay cooped up in the house from morning to evening with her only distraction being the heaping of the foulest curses on her sister. Her much-occupied husband was of little comfort to her.

Minna tried to develop interest in television and films for want of some exciting diversion. It got her no where. Immediately she was in front of the screen, she would either be dozing away or her mind would be wandering from one thing to the other, stealing away the slightest interest in any program. All she could do to keep away her horrible thoughts was work.

She would clean everything at home. If there was no major cleaning to be done, she would concentrate on removing the tiniest specks of dust or polishing her crockery. Then she would experiment on new and sophisticated dishes, just for the sake of keeping busy.

When she had to go out like going to the market, she would have no other choice but strapping the child on her stressed out back. For a lady of her status, that was most awkward and she could tell from gasps and furtive looks she witnessed from people who knew her. These often made her feel ill at ease but she had to bear it. She thought of a pram but it was out of the question in a town with no safe sidewalks, and where vehicular traffic had very little restraint as to what it could do on the roads.

Another possible option she attempted was help from Sister Samba. Once, she left the child with her friend only to come back and be bombarded with bitter complaints about the strain. Minna just had to do it all by herself. Here she was bearing the product of an ungrateful sister who was indifferent to the plight of others.

She hated the child for having cornered her into this prison. She tried very hard to look for another alternative place for him. One moment, the option of the orphanage would look attractive and the very next moment, she would be cancelling it for fear of all its possible traumatising repercussions.

It was during such moments she wished she had taken the offer by her family and left the child behind in Widikum. The thought of this made the most recent offer by her aunt a real turn off. Her father would go bonkers to think his own beloved daughter would prefer to hand a child to the control of an aunt attached to a stranger than him. Her father would put a curse on her.

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One morning, Minna got up very late. She had made the child almost a permanent companion on her bed especially as her rightful partner had been completely seduced by a new bride - the big contract. The house was as usual quiet when she got up. She used the toilet with her eyes half-closed and was determined to go back to bed.

When she climbed on the bed, she noticed that where Ngam normally slept was bare. She yanked away all the sheets. There was nothing besides a bare mattress. Her heartbeat rose until she could hear it ticking like a clock. She dashed out of the room and made straight for the parlour. There was just one conclusion in her mind. The cult had got him.

Her immediate reaction was to go straight to the police then she remembered she could call when she got out on the veranda. She searched for the phone everywhere in her room but only remembered some minutes after that she had left it on the cupboard in the dining room.

When she finally picked up the phone and was about to dial, she heard a noise coming from the kitchen. The cult? The hair on her body stood on end and she felt like screaming and running out of the house at the same time. Then something like a spoon fell on the ground. A cat or rat? she thought. They did not have any cat but one was fond of finding its way into her kitchen and feasting on left-over food.

After grabbing a stool for protection, Minna went on her toes towards the kitchen. She shoved the door with her shoulder and it went faster than she had planned. She nearly ran back but remained on the spot, immobilised by what she saw.

Leaning on the handle of the cover of the oven section of her cooker was master Ngam, standing on his two feet and spluttering some very serious infant poetry. He began waving one of his hands as if saying, "see me Mami". He had this cherubic smile on his face that would charm even the stoniest of hearts.

Minna's heart melted and she looked at the child like she was seeing him for the first time. She folded her arms and leaned against the jamb of the door, her eyes fixated on the toddler. How did he get here? Minna asked herself, her heart retiring to its normal quiet duty. As if to answer her question, Ngam released the other hand from the cooker and started making some wobbly steps in Minna's direction.

Minna screamed for joy, beating her hands in the air. She rushed and picked him up when he faltered and fell. She threw him up in the air and kissed him. This was the very joy she had felt four times before; seeing her babies make the first step.

She was overcome by this towering sense of triumph. A joy so deep and complete that she felt as if she could fly. This was indeed a very special moment for she felt that in spite of having been treating the child like a physical task she was duty-bound to undertake, she had succeeded in getting him to arrive one critical stage on the way to becoming an independent human being. Not only did she feel her labour had been rewarded by these toddling steps, she also felt the urge to do more for the child to cross other milestones.

All of a sudden, she felt a powerful current coming from the child right into her heart making her feel connected to the child in much profound way. She felt something special when she raised the child again and looked into his glazed, brown eyes. The child wrapped his arms around her neck and Minna felt this was the most powerful expression of affection she had ever had from another human being. She closed her eyes as her own arms enveloped the child. Her eyes burned with tears and a cold spring of guilt burst in her heart. Why had she been giving the poor child arm's length care when he was hungry for a much deeper love from her?

For the first time, she felt a natural obligation towards the child not just because of his unfortunate circumstances but also because he was like any of her children. He had taken the concrete step on the road to autonomy just like her other children. There was just no reason for taking the child as an interloper for he had given her that total loving smile that told her, I owe you my life. The child had expressed appreciation for all she had done and was giving her love that she had held back from giving him. This child was her true blood. She pressed him against her chest as if taking an oath to change and love him unconditionally.

'My grandfather! I promise you can depend on me forever. Everybody has abandoned me but you haven't.'

It was the sound of the bell that made her realise she had actually been voicing out a sacred promise. With the child in her arms, she hurried out of the house and opened the gate. The first face she saw was Lisha's. Minna was surprised to see Lisha. She was even more surprised about the other guest. She was some strange woman whom Minna did not like at first sight. She had a very stern face and bare, closely cropped hair. For a woman, this was too strong.

'What brings you here this early, Lisha? It's holiday time.'

Lisha let herself in and urged the woman to follow her. Lisha pointed at the woman with her chin. The woman did not utter any greetings and Minna noted the rude manners. What made Minna even more alert was how the woman had sharp eyes fixated on Ngam. The cult! Something popped in Minna's chest and she would have screamed in fear had Lisha not started speaking.

'This is Mrs Abbe Marceline. She is from the nation's capital. She appeared in my house late last evening to ask if I could lead her to you. But it was too late so I promised to bring her here today. That's why I am here this early.'

'What does she want?' Minna asked, not too politely. She could go mad for the way the woman kept looking at Ngam.

'*Madam, à vous le parole,*' said Lisha to the woman in deeply accented French.

'No, she has to speak in English if she expects me to understand. My French deserted me since I left the training college.' Minna's French was indeed not the best.

'She can speak English though not fluently. Right, madam?'

The woman looked at Lisha and nodded. '*Oui. Très bien.*' She turned back to Minna. 'Tsenk you for let me in. Zis *bébé* iz not yours, yes?'

Minna's arms tightened around Ngam and she took a step backwards. 'What is this woman talking about Lisha?'

'Maybe she is not putting it well. She has come all the way from Yaounde for she heard you found a strange baby in your house months back.' Lisha looked at Minna hoping she was on the right track.

Minna did not react. She kept stern eyes at the woman. The woman in turn kept eyeing the child and her feet that were embedded in trainers. Minna wondered whether the woman was not comfortable in the trainers.

'I remember you told me about the child. That made me think ...' Lisha's voice trailed off for she could tell she had touched Minna on the wrong side. 'Can we go in?' Lisha added nervously.

'I think we can talk here,' said Minna with some force. 'Tell her the *bébé* issue has been resolved. He is actually my sister's. My sister was the one who brought him here.'

'Are you *cent pour cent* sure he iz your sister *bébé*? You make hospital test?' The woman moved closer and Minna took the same number of steps backwards.

'I think this conversation is over. Please Lisha, take your guest back and tell her I can't help her.'

The woman butted in before Lisha could utter a word. 'My sister, don't fear. I from zis part of contry lek you. Just zat I was born francophone and married zere. My brozer iz here iz anglophone. Wife left wiz all *bébé*. He make one *bébé* wiz friend woman. Woman hide *bébé* away. Big *bébé*. She deny to tell where. My brozer and he family, we look for zee *bébé*. No see. Zat why we hear your story and I come here. I beg don't vex.'

'The child you are looking for is not here,' said Minna curtly. 'Please, I am very busy.' Minna went and opened the gate wider.

The woman looked at Minna with unbelieving eyes. 'I sorry for trouble I make. Just few question and I go.'

'Sorry,' entered Minna rudely. 'No more questions. I have to go back in.'

'*Très bien*. I go and tell zem he waz your sister *bébé*.' The woman was the first out of the gate and it was plain to see she was not going to give up.

'Sister, sorry if I did a wrong thing. I was only trying to be helpful.' That was Lisha looking really frightened.

'It's okay Lisha. But the next time you receive such a visitor for me, do call first. And I'll advise you not to just accept any kind of person in your house in the name of being hospitable.'

'I've learnt my lesson sister.' Lisha followed the woman swearing as she went down the road.

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Minna snapped the gate locked immediately Lisha stepped out. Her whole body was shaking. All she had in her mind was that this woman was an agent of the cult and she had the assignment to abduct the child. She ran as fast as she could back into the house and keyed all the doors leading outside. Still clasping the child, she served herself a glass of ice-cold water and consciously fought in vain to steady her nerves.

She went into the parlour and lay on the couch sideways with Ngam sandwiched between her and the back of the couch. She studied the face of the child closely and the only resemblance she could see was that of her sister.

After voicing one curse for the woman's temerity, she rolled off the couch and grabbed the family photo album from the cupboard. She opened the page where there was a large picture of their family years back when her father was still a young man. Ma and Pa were sitting while their three naïve children stood obediently behind, broad smiles on their faces.

Minna had not looked at the picture for a long time. She could not remember when she last touched the album. She hated recalling the past. The past often left her with nostalgic cravings, that she could not satisfy or brought back painful regrets. But the memories about Dorothy's past were still very fresh. Tears began to fill her eyes as she began to recall how good things used to be.

She and her brother and sister used to make a tight trio; defending each other in school and playing together. Her brother used to steal a friend's bicycle and would secretly teach both of his sisters how to ride. That was how Minna got to know how to ride. How she missed those gregarious times.

Minna came to a picture, which she had taken with Dorothy during her wedding all those years back. Dorothy looked innocent and optimistic. She was wearing an oversized frock but looked proud of herself. Her hair stood out in long, pointed plaits that reminded Minna of the spikes of a frightened porcupine.

Minna laughed and doubled over when after looking deeper, she discovered that her sister's jaws were unusually puffed out. Then she remembered that that particular day, Dorothy had stolen a huge piece of meat from a dish on table just when she was called to appear for the photo shot. Nchoh, their only brother reported the theft and when Minna slapped her sister on the jaw, the piece of meat came flying out. Everyone had burst out laughing even though Minna was boiling with embarrassment.

Her sister used to be a truant but at the same time devoted to orderliness and hard work. The only other person she could think of who could measure up to Dorothy was Manka. Dorothy used to work without complaining. She treated all the children as hers. Minna could remember very well the early days in her marital home when life was manageable only because Dorothy was there to bear all the dirty domestic work. And she even aided them financially when the going was tough.

Dorothy was also a compelling aunt who always had the children rushing to her for everything from lessons on good manners to nursing bruises. They were always sure to have a warm cuddle and lullabies to send them to sleep. Her sister did play a big role in nurturing the children in every sphere. She owed her sister a big one.

The tears rolled down her face as she could not understand why her sister changed abruptly. Her sister could have been a renowned scientist now or a super doctor running a reputable hospital. If Dorothy had not allowed herself to be lured by vain things, she would have been helping Minna to sort out the problems that were in their compound in Widikum. Minna would have been walking tall knowing she had a talented and dependable sister who could back her up in any difficulty.

In spite of the disappointment, Minna still wished she could have her sister back. She recalled what one teacher used to say: "Where there is life, there is hope." The fact that Dorothy was alive opened the possibilities to the fact that she could be reformed and inserted back into respectable society. There were hundreds of extremely bad individuals who eventually saw the light and became very useful citizens. Minna could not immediately think of any but she was certain they existed.

Minna missed her sister. Her sister had served her well for no commensurate compensation. Dorothy had not given Minna the chance to say thank you properly, for all the help and care. Minna wished she had expressed this appreciation to Dorothy while they were still together. Maybe that would have done much to keep Dorothy steady on the right path. Minna was yet to pay Dorothy back for washing her clothes and taking care of things when Minna was busy with studies.

Minna loved her sister in spite of all that had happened. Perhaps it was one of those funny errors in life that had unwittingly wrong-footed Dorothy. Everybody committed some error during some part of their life and should not be condemned for that. Minna thus had to find it in her heart not only to forgive but also to fight to rehabilitate her sister.

Minna dumped the pictures on the table and leaned back on the couch to repent of all the sins she had committed against her sister. The sin of not going to look for Dorothy even after several pleas from Ma. The sin of not having searched deeper for the formula that would have kept her sister straight. She had not cared deeply enough, Minna chided herself. And she had been disobedient to her mother. Two cardinal sins.

Minna also decided to beg God to forgive her for not accepting Ngam totally. Ngam was indeed her nephew and in addition, a helpless creature from the almighty. After making a brief prayer, Minna got up from the couch and made some solemn pledges. First, sparing no energy to extract her sister from the tentacles of the dubious cult in spite of the threat, and bringing her back on the right path. Also, treating Ngam like her own very child. The child deserved more than the detached benevolence she had reserved for him thus far.

If the first pledge was going to be difficult as it appeared likely, the second one was doable. Minna looked into the face of the child and could not understand why she used to despise him. Though the child was asleep, his face radiated nothing but a compelling cheerfulness that invoked in Minna a pure sentiment of love. Minna took him in her arms

and felt like sticking him to her forever. That was how the bond between she and her sister used to feel.

Minna was going to preserve the life of Dorothy's child while securing a problem free future for him. She was going to protect him from the wicked hands of the cult or childless opportunists who thought the easiest way of having a child was by claiming Ngam. Cursed be that woman who would ever dare again lay a claim on Ngam. 'Zee *bébé*,' Minna mimicked Mrs Abbe and brushed a hand over Ngam's face.

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Tetang decided to take a week off from the construction site for the works had reached a stage where it could run for some time without his presence. It was a welcome relief for Minna though she was getting used to her plight. She had already done close to a month of the lonely task without dying.

However, it was a good change to have someone else watching over the child, even for just a couple of minutes while she was cooking or cleaning. It was also a welcome change to have someone on whom to verbalise any stress and have a sympathetic ear in return. The house could do with some good adult conversation but most importantly, she now had someone who could wrap his arms around her and make her feel the protected and not the overburdened protector.

For once, Minna could afford to lie on the couch and relax while Tetang cobbled some breakfast in the kitchen. He was exceptionally proficient in frying potatoes and omelettes. He usually tossed in some special spicy combination that often left the taste buds smarting for more. Minna's mouth was swimming in saliva when she heard a scrape on the door.

'Cursed are those who visit only at meal times,' she wept. 'You left the gate open, Tee?' Minna remembered.

'Oh sorry, I forgot. I had told myself that after parking the car in the garage, I will lock it back but hunger didn't let me. Go and do it for me, please.'

'That's not even my problem. Someone is already at the door. It could be a thief or who knows, one of those diabolical people.'

'You are getting paranoid about those people,' Tetang said and came out of the kitchen with a full tray in his hand. He lowered it on the dining table and went to the door. He pulled the blind slightly, released it back and turned to face Minna with this startled look on his face. 'Albert Njotu! Can you believe it?' he whispered

'What on earth does he want this early? I thought I had rid myself of his type forever.' Minna rose from the chair.

'But apparently he doesn't know how to disappear.'

'Is he alone, Tee?'

Tetang nodded but had this look of uncertainty. Was this a response to his last impromptu visit? Albert was not the kind of person he would wish to be exchanging visits with.

'Open the door now. He must have heard our voices.'

Tetang opened the door and wore a warm hospitable smile as he shook hands with Albert. He recalled his own last visit and could not find any reason why he had to be smiling this much. Off went the smile and on came a more pragmatic, bland look as he let the guest in.

Albert looked as craggy as ever though a fashionable sarong did much to disguise his sorry frame. He greeted Minna but concentrated on Tetang. 'I would like to talk to you alone, outside,' he said in a near whisper.

'Alone?' Tetang held his chest. He eyed his wife then led the man back to the veranda and shut the door.

'The gate was opened. That's why I just came in,' Albert began.

'Well you are already in so there is no problem. What was it you wanted to tell me?'



Albert cleared his throat while holding his waist. He went and leaned on the balustrade that went round the edge of the veranda. Tetang stood rigidly by the door, watching him keenly.

'I came to tell you just one thing.'

Sounded ominous. Tetang shrugged his shoulders to urge his guest on. The man seemed to be battling within himself as if trying to find the best way of saying a difficult thing.

'Leave my woman alone,' he snapped and bent his head over the balustrade.

Tetang felt some pounding in his chest. He could have squeezed Albert's neck if they were in a more isolated place. 'I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't pretend mister. I know you are after my Bridget.' Mr Njotu turned around again and his eyes looked glazed over with tears. 'Please, I know I am not married to her yet but she is the only thing I have left of any value. Without her I will commit suicide.'

Tetang almost felt sorry for him and found himself laughing. He hit himself against the very balustrade before pulling himself together. This was not something for him to get uptight about. It was a damn comedy. 'You mean Bridget and me?' Tetang held his stomach and burst out laughing again.

'It is no laughing matter,' said Albert, his face deflated like a man who could die at any moment. 'Please, stay away from her.'

Tetang shook his head vigorously. 'I don't know who told you what. Whether it is Bridget herself or some flying rumour. I can guarantee you more than a hundred percent, I have nothing to do with your Bridget. I don't even know her, not to talk of chasing her. No Mr Njotu. You have my word and God is my witness. As far as I am concerned, Bridget is all yours. I am not in the line and will never be. Whoever told you, it is a plain lie. Unless they are talking about someone else who bears my name. I am not there.' Tetang ended by raising his hands to assure his accuser.

'Are you sure?' asked Albert, his face flushed with hope and yet doubt.

'On my honour, if that means anything to you.'

Mr Njotu looked remorseful. 'Well, I am sorry if I am wrong. I'll keep investigating. Whoever I find trying to steal my woman away from me, or even interfering with her, I will kill that person even if I have to die. I have told Bridget that myself. I know she has done much that under normal circumstances, I should dump her. But as at now, I have no alternative. It's too late now. I have warned her myself that I will not tolerate her philandering anymore. I have to keep her. It's either her or her, if you understand my drift.'

Tetang nodded profusely in a way that should tell any normal person that he could not care less and that their presence was no longer desirable. But Albert was no normal person as he had another bag of things to say. He went on to talk about structural problems they were having with the bridge in his quarters and was hoping Tetang could drop by and have a look. Tetang had to make the promise if only to get the man out of his yard.

Minna was waiting anxiously by the door as Tetang locked the gate after Albert had gone. She did not even wait for him to step on the veranda before posing the obvious question.

'He came to find out if I could come and look over their bridge which appears to be having problems.'

'Then why did you have to raise your hands as if he was trying to slap your face?'

Tetang was surprised. 'You were eavesdropping?'

'You left the blinds partially opened. I could see you but I couldn't hear anything.'

Tetang looked into her eyes wondering whether to believe her. He had to assume she was being truthful. 'I raised my hands. The amount they proposed for me was too small. Imagine them offering me just a thousand francs to visit and diagnose the problem. I just told him I would do it for free.'

'And is that something so confidential that he doesn't want me to hear?'

'He's a shy man.' Tetang scratched his head and left his wife standing. He was scared the truth might force its way out of him if he did not run away from the probing eyes of his wife. Though he had nothing to do with Bridget, just the mention of it, he was scared, could make Minna go mad.

Even if she might not say it, he was afraid she was going to assume there was no smoke without fire and would start reading into every innocent word or gesture he made. That would make life most uncomfortable for him. Especially now that he wanted peace and quiet to recuperate in order to continue managing his project well.

But with this visit, he knew he was not going to have complete peace until he could find out why Albert was suspicious of him. Was it due to his surprise visit that the man had formulated his conspiracy theory? Had he left any impression that he intended to make a pass at Bridget? The thought revolted him. Bridget had once greeted him nicely and while he appreciated that it did not take away the poor impression that had been given to him by the barman. Women of ill repute were not part of his game plan. And Bridget was definitely the queen bee in that hive.

Was it possible that Bridget out of some forlorn fantasy had been touting his name to rouse jealousy in her boyfriend? This was a very reasonable possibility. But the best way of finding out was confronting Bridget and giving her the stiffest warning. And he had to do that in a smooth way so as to avoid any scandal.

'Why don't we try your aunt's proposal about Ngam for some time and see if it could work?' Tetang said to his wife who had joined him in the parlour. He had to initiate a new topic just to avoid further discussions about Njotu's visit, which might lead to talk about Bridget. Tetang was not prepared to discuss this with Minna. The topic however was one that had begun to trouble him deeply.

'And get disowned by my father? No. Anyway, I no longer feel the child is any burden. In fact, I don't intend to allow anyone to take him away from me again. He is going to grow up with me.'

'This one that you are sounding like this. You suddenly discovered the child was what you had been looking for all your life?'

'Is that intended to mock at me?' Minna went and sat in the couch opposite him.

'This child, if you want to know is interfering with my pleasure,' said Tetang closing his eyes in embarrassment. But he was being honest.

Minna was stunned. 'I don't see how he is doing that? You are blaming an innocent child for the fatigue. If you get real close to him, he will definitely fill you with happiness as he has been doing to me.'

She really did not understand, thought Tetang. 'No thank you. I prefer getting real close to the woman of my life.' Tetang got up and went to the dining table without another word. The breakfast he had prepared was already cold. He dug in nevertheless. He ate without even inviting Minna though the food was for both of them. He avoided looking at her. Not even when the cry of Ngam blasted out from one of the rooms.

Minna was in the room in one swift movement. The air in the house all of a sudden felt stuffy.

Akwen was the first of the children to come back. It was all Minna's doing. After her husband's week-long break expired, she discovered to her own surprise that she could no longer cope on her own as she used to do before. Tetang had left her desperate for adult company. Since she could not have him, the next best person she could think of was Akwen.

Minna had to call her daughter to come back. Akwen protested strongly for she had been enjoying herself with her paternal grandmother in Bafut. The timing was especially bad because Akwen had been looking forward to a gala night that was to be organised by students on holidays. And she had paid a fortune as her own contribution. She was even supposed to be the chief usher for the night. She begged to stay on till the day after the gala to no avail. She even asked that the child be sent to her in Bafut if her mother was that desperate. But her mother was dead set against that.

Minna was not going to let Ngam out of her sight or house. Not until she was satisfied the child was out of the threat of abduction. Even if she was going to have a sulking daughter as companion and helper, it was miles better than sending the child away and living on her toes.

Following Minna's pleas, Tetang reluctantly drove to Bafut and brought Akwen in person. He was not happy that their own child had to sacrifice her deserved vacation for Ngam, who was becoming a growing nuisance in his house. He was having too much of his wife's attention; almost all of it.

Even when Akwen was around, Minna was the one who took care of everything about the child while Akwen was restricted to general cleaning and cooking. Akwen was shocked that her mother would even go to the extent of ironing the child's napkins which they used to ignore. Her mother would not iron any of her own children's clothes. That was Akwen's duty.

Her mother would seize the child from Akwen when Akwen wanted to give him his bath. As for the child's food, that was a no-go area for Akwen. Her mother insisted she was the only one who knew how to prepare what Ngam liked. What irritated Akwen the most was the fact that her mother would insist on strapping the child on her back while working even when Akwen had nothing to do. Why then did her mother have to cut short her holidays?

So enraged was Akwen with her mother's new obsession that she finally went and complained to her father. Tetang who was dying for the opportunity to sting his wife for the imbalance she was creating in their home could however not find the courage to bare his mind in a civilised way. Each moment he tried to open up, the honest words would hang on his tongue. He knew that the earthquake that would certainly follow would break the Richter Scale. Besides, how could he let Minna think he was jealous of all the attention a poor, abandoned child was getting from her. That would be too embarrassing and perhaps wicked.

Minna was in no compromising mood as far as Ngam was concerned and no mature discussion was going to assuage her paranoia. Only a fight, he decided would provoke the discussion even if it was going to be acrimonious.

Tetang started the provocation by coming home deliberately very late again and not eating his meals. He would not reproach Akwen for being irritable and sometimes rebellious towards her mother. Minna would complain to him and he would move quietly away with a smirk on his face.

Minna seemed to have sensed what her husband wanted and refused to fall in the trap. But not for long. One night, Tetang removed the sleeping child from Minna's arms and kept him on Akwen's bed. Late in the night, Ngam got up and started to cry. The cry was

very sharp, forcing both Minna and Tetang to wake up. 'Where are you going?' Tetang snapped. 'Akwen is with him. She can look after him.'

'Who?' quipped Minna. 'Akwen? That lazy girl? She is no longer the Akwen I used to know. Since she came back from Bafut, she has been most irritating. Talks to me anyhow and is uncaring. And you don't bother about it. You know why I took the child away from her? When he wakes up and cries, she would cover her head under the blanket and pretend to be deep asleep.'

'That's exaggerating it and you know it,' said Tetang angrily. 'My daughter knows how to take care of babies.'

'You want to tell me that she hasn't heard the child crying now. I know what she is waiting for. Me to wake up also and join her. That is how petty-minded and vindictive she has become. I am no longer going to give her the pleasure. I'll take the child away once and for all.' Minna rushed out of the room before Tetang could swear at her.

Tetang was sitting on the edge of the bed, arms across his chest and his eyes crunched to little slits when he heard Minna coming down the corridor. His heart pounded furiously when Minna ignored him, sat on the very bed but a distance away from him and began to rock the child with this look of indifference on her face.

A lump that had formed in Tetang's throat grew large and blocked his voice. He only succeeded to grumble and in desperation rolled to the edge of the bed, facing the wall. He was the one who needed pampering after a hard day's work. Not some child who was not loved even by his own mother.

When the child finally slept, Minna did a thing, which Tetang had decided that very night was never going to happen again. Enough was enough. Satisfied that the child was deep asleep, Minna placed him gently by Tetang and lowered herself on the front edge of the bed. Tetang could no longer control himself. 'Get this bastard out of here,' he fumed, rising from the bed. He pulled the blanket and dumped it on the floor on his side.

'This is not happening,' quipped Minna, rising also. 'You are fighting with a child?'

Tetang gave his wife the cold stare, then gritted his teeth as he battled in his mind for the appropriate response. What could he say? He slid off the bed, gathered the blanket and dashed out of room. He was going to sleep in his son's room.

'Tee wait,' said Minna, yawning. She sighed and fell on the bed. 'The child is not well. We'll talk tomorrow.' Minna added in a despairing voice.

'This house is not a hospital,' Tetang barked from the corridor and entered Rogers' empty room.

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Early the following morning, Minna had barely brushed her teeth when she heard the rev of the engine. Her program for the morning had been to get Akwen to prepare breakfast while she was to prepare the child for hospital. She rushed out of the room for she had been assuming Tetang would drive her and the child to the hospital. When she came out of the house, he was already setting the car out of the garage. 'It's just a quarter to seven.' She waved her wrist watch and pressed it against the glass on the driver's door.

Tetang did not even turn his face. He concentrated on his gear lever.

'You have not eaten,' she shouted, doing an impression of eating with her fingers. 'You should understand,' she added weakly as the car began to roll towards the gate. She stood in the garage and watched in desperation and confusion as Tetang swept the car out of the compound. And he drove away with such mind-boggling speed, that Minna stood wondering whether he was not being chased by demons.

It was only after the sound of the engine had faded that she realised she could regain some of her composure only by cursing loudly. She did until she was hit by a piercing cry. It dragged her bolting back into her room where she had left the child on his own. She met Akwen over the child, struggling to fasten his napkins.

'Don't make it too tight,' Minna barked, shoved Akwen aside and fell on the child herself. Satisfied with the diapers, she picked up the child and tapped him against her chest to calm him down.

When Minna turned around, Akwen was standing by the door, her arms folded and her face creased over in fury. 'You were still there?' asked Minna with indifference.

That infuriated Akwen all the more. 'Mami, you pushed me,' she said, pressing her lips and shaking her head.

'I did? I am sorry my dear. But you know this child has a temperature and you were not doing anything to calm him down.'

'And you had to push me, Mami?'

'Oh, I didn't mean it. It just happened.' Minna laid the child back on the bed. He had stopped crying. She poured all her attention once more on him, wrapping him well and ignoring her daughter. The urgent business facing her was taking the child as fast as possible to the hospital. She turned to go into the toilet and realised her daughter had not moved one inch nor had she modified her countenance.

'Are you tied there or something?' said Minna with some shock. 'I thought you had gone to change. Or was there something you wanted to ask me?'

'Mami, you are changing and I don't like it,' said Akwen, seething with rage.

Minna swallowed some spit. 'I don't believe this. You have the audacity to talk to me like that? Since when did it happen? You have no right to talk to your mother like that. I am the one who brought you into this world and it is not the other way round. I beg you, don't add to the insults that your father has heaped on me this morning. Just go and change as I said to accompany me to the hospital. Ngam is very sick. You are a woman, you have to care.'

Minna did not budge. Instead, she twisted her face further and began to grumble. Minna wanted to shout and slap but felt numb. This was getting above her. 'Well, if you are not going to accompany me to the hospital, stay and grumble as much as you want. But just make sure that by the time I come back, your father's lunch is ready.'

Akwen was glad not to go. But she was not through with her mother. She grumbled derisively. 'Lunch for which father?'

'What kind of attitude is this you are developing? Is this the kind of thing that holiday fosters? If you don't want me to commit a sin now, just get out of my sight.'

Akwen softened her voice in a parody of obedience. 'Mami I am simply trying to remind you that Pa no longer takes lunch in this house.'

'I didn't ask you to remind me of anything. What I simply asked you to do and I still insist on it is that you prepare lunch for your father.'

'What then do I prepare,' asked Akwen, subtly defiant.

'Anything. Especially what your father would like.' Minna was getting sick with the conversation. How could her own daughter be challenging her this openly? Was it because she too was developing into a woman? Had some crooked man snaked his way into her daughter's life?

'But Mami, you always tell me what to prepare. How would I know what your husband likes?'

'I said your father. I did not say my husband.' Minna made some threatening steps towards her daughter.

Akwen took a similar number of steps backwards. 'It's the same thing now, Mami.'

'No, it isn't. If you still have water inside your head, you will know it.'

'I don't,' blurted Akwen, retreating further into the corridor.

'You shut up this moment, Mrs Pompous before I lose my temper on you.'

Akwen fled in defiant strides. She was aware she had done it too much but someone had to tell her mother she was going off track. Akwen was already feeling bad as it was after the brutal termination of her holidays only for her mother to make her feel like some fugitive in her own home. The gala had passed some two weeks back and she was trying to

get over her disappointment. But this new attitude of her mother was not helping her to do so quickly.

Akwen went and sat on the lawn under the plum tree. With her hands supporting her trunk from the back and her legs stretched out in front, she began to reflect on what was happening to her mother. Her mother cared about nobody else but Ngam. Her mother practically did the entire baby-sitting. Her mother was the one who fed the child, bathed him and played with him most of the time.

Ngam was called the sweetest names that Akwen had ever heard being used on a child. And she her daughter was finding it difficult to discuss with her own mother. It was every bit strange. Her mother had always been attentive to everyone. This new obsession of hers called Ngam was driving Akwen mad. It was an obsession that had seen her once sober mother, become jumpy and quick tempered.

Akwen had also noticed the cool atmosphere that was growing between her parents. The fact that her father now slept more often in Rogers' room, leaving very early without breakfast and coming very late could only mean tension was brewing.

Akwen had at one time even wanted to ask her mother why they were wasting time preparing food for her father who often ate just a little and the rest often had to be thrown away. But as she suspected there was a problem between them, she decided to keep sensibly quiet. She just hoped all this was not driving towards her worst nightmare - her parents divorcing.

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'Tee, there is something we have to do very urgently,' said Minna to her husband who for once came home much earlier and was enjoying a supper of jollof rice that Akwen had prepared.

Tetang had just reached an understanding with his clients and this had to do with his first pay cheque, which he was going to receive at the end of the week; just in two days time. The people had expressed total satisfaction with the progress of the works. 'Has Rita arrived?' He remembered Rita had phoned that they should pick her up at the motor park.

'No that's tomorrow. Remember I went with Ngam to the hospital three days ago.' Minna who had settled at the head of the table next to her husband nudged him playfully.

'The child is okay now?' said Tetang in a detached way.

'He is quite well but that is not the urgency. I met a friend who is a lawyer in the market and we started discussing. She scared the hell out of me when she told me that Ngam needs a birth certificate. Without it, the lawyer says Ngam might be handed to anyone who comes with the relevant certificate. My mind immediately went to that francophone woman. You think she could have gone and fabricated some fake certificate in order to take away Ngam? The lawyer made me realise this was a distinct possibility.'

The passion in his wife's voice frightened him. 'Don't know,' muted Tetang, shrugging his shoulders.

Minna was undaunted. 'Yes, I suspect very much that that evil woman could be up to such a mischief. In this country, birth certificates can be fabricated anywhere and at anytime.'

'Just tell me. Why should I be interested in this story?'

Minna was surprised at his hostility. 'Come on, Tee. We have to do something before that woman gets the law on her side and drags the child away from us.'

Tetang kept eating as if unconcerned.

'We have to fabricate our own birth certificate before that woman brings us trouble.'

Tetang dropped the spoon in his hand and leaned against the chair. 'That is illegal and I am not going to be a party to illegality.'

'Don't be hypocritical, Tee. You don't have the moral grounds to preach. I know some heavy illegal sums of money were paid for you to win a certain contract that is in progress.'

'I can see you no longer have the interest of this family at heart. The sums were paid for

I knew this family would gain ultimately.'

'I know that, Tee and this one also the family would gain.'

'How?' blurted Tetang with startled look.

'Ngam would be safely and securely ours.'

'Yours, not ours. I didn't tell you I was looking for another child.'

Minna was shocked and she clamped a hand over her mouth. Tetang refocused his attention on his food. 'You didn't say what I just heard.'

'You heard me plain and square. Ngam is your sister's child and not ours. If you are going to establish whatever certificate for him, it is going to be in his parent's name. How do you think Dorothy would feel if she sees our names as the parents of her own very child?'

'But she sent the child to us.' She looked at her husband as if he was the most hateful person on earth.

'Maybe, maybe not. If at all it is the case, then until she tells us directly, the only position we can assume is one of caretakers. You don't want to start another family war by claiming parentage of your sister's only child. The family might not take it kindly.'

'Tee, you make it sound as if I am trying to engage in some capital crime. The certificate would only be a temporary measure; for the child's safety. Should Dorothy appear, she would have every right to take her child.'

'What if she gets a copy of your own certificate before appearing? She is going to inform everyone and before long, we would be entangled in some messy family feud. You know the capacity of your own sister; building mountains out of anthills. You are not going to transform me into a child thief, Minna. That's what your family is going to call me.'

Minna wiped a hand over her face. 'Tee, you are the one now building a mountain out of nothing. If this woman succeeds in getting Ngam by using false documents, I am the one who is going to be ridiculed by my family for life. I am the one who Dorothy is going to blame forever. Is that what you are wishing for me?'

'Dorothy can have no grounds to blame you. She had abandoned the child in the first place.' Tetang avoided Minna's eyes. Was he pushing it too much?

'That's my point. Since he is an abandoned child and we already have him, why don't we just go ahead then and adopt him for God's sake.'

Tetang made a derisive laugh and pushed his plate away. 'Don't use God to blackmail me Minna. I have told you I don't need another child. I don't need your sister's child. If you want to adopt him, go ahead and do so. Fru Tetang is not going to be an accomplice to it. I am no longer hungry.' He kicked the chair away and went out of the main door.

Minna followed him feeling frustrated. 'Try and understand, Tee,' she pleaded. 'Please, I need your understanding.'

'No, you don't need my understanding. What you actually need is me acquiescing to your paranoid obsession.' Tetang was behind the wheel of the car that he had parked in the garage.

Minna hit the glass that was wound up. Tetang did not even look at her. He simply started the engine and set the car in reverse as Minna stepped aside. 'What's wrong with you?' Minna screamed, covering her face in her hands. 'This is the second time you are driving out on me.'

Tetang did not hear. He pumped the engine more and came out only to open the gate and locking it after he had moved the car.

'Keep running away. You think that will solve anything?' Tears filled Minna's eyes and she started sobbing.

Akwen rushed out with the child to see her mother break down in a cry. 'What happened, Mami? Why were you people shouting? What is going on in this family?' Inevitable water also began to run down Akwen's face. 'Mami tell me the truth. Are you two going to get divorced?'

Minna was numbed by the question. She wanted to say something but did not know



what to say. She simply wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and limped into the house. 'Your father has changed,' she lamented as she stepped over the threshold.

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Akwen's question kept ricocheting in Minna's mind for days and for the first time she realised the tension was also getting to her daughter. All the defiance and resentment she was getting from the girl did not just come out of the blue. It definitely had its genesis in their home.

Minna decided she had to reach some understanding with her in order to set her daughter's mind at ease and to appease her for having terminated her vacation abruptly. She was not going to live in peace if her first daughter who used to be like her best friend should turn out to hate her.

In the tight jam in which she had found herself, she needed her own people to support her. Antagonism from them could only worsen her fragile state of mind. Tetang had already made up his mind not to understand her and while that was bad enough, she could not afford to have the back of another close family member turned against her also.

Minna was aware that of late, she had not succeeded in making any member of her own direct family smile. Akwen was hostile to her. Tetang was practically ignoring her and lately, Ngam too had started misbehaving as if the growing negative atmosphere was weighing down on him. Nothing she did seemed to please anyone. She had to win her children to her side. That was why when Rita called to say she was coming back, Minna quickly promised to prepare coki-corn for her. Rita was fed up with insipid holiday camp food and only some home cooked special could revive her spirits.

Preparing coki-corn was quite a demanding task and Minna would not even have considered it had she not accepted to herself that she had to start doing things to please people she wanted on her side. If she could respond positively to her God-fearing daughter, perhaps she might win at least a daughter to her side and if possible, also God.

She had to go to the market to get some fresh corn. And there her brains began to spin again. She could exploit the occasion to do something that could touch her oldest daughter's heart. That meant going along with Akwen and of course Ngam too. And that was the hard part.

Minna knew her Akwen liked going to the market but Minna was scared of what might happen if Ngam was exposed to the public. She could not possibly know what the plans of the cult or the francophone woman might be. Perhaps they were hanging about, waiting for the slightest opportunity to seize him. In the market with the teeming population, it would be easy for a smart person to seize the child and vanish in the crowd.

Minna could as well leave the child at home with Akwen and do a very fast shopping. But this was a golden opportunity to make peace with her daughter. She called Akwen who had been sitting out on the veranda, brooding over her fears.

Akwen strolled lazily into the parlour to join her mother. She held a novel and had not even opened a page. Minna could see the fear and juvenile contempt on the girl's face. 'Sit down my daughter.' Minna tapped the chair next to her.

Akwen did reluctantly.

Minna spoke sincerely. 'I am sorry for the way I have been treating you. I know you want to understand what is going on but I am not giving you the chance. You are a big girl, growing into a woman and I think you will understand what I have to say.'

Akwen nodded with indifference. At least her mother had acknowledged her maturity.

'First, your father and I are far from getting divorce. We have a difference, which sooner or later would be cleared off. It is not your business anyway. Just know that it's just part of the normal disagreement, which spices up every marriage. You'll get married one day and you'll understand. Dorothy is my sister and in spite of her bad character, blood is thicker than water. I still love her and would sacrifice my all for her to survive if it comes to it. You would sacrifice for Rita or Tiffuh, wouldn't you?' Minna turned and looked into the

eyes of her oldest daughter.

Akwen bowed her head and nodded shyly.

‘Good. That’s how I feel about my sister. Ngam is her only child. The only thing about her that I have. Shouldn’t I keep and protect him?’

‘Mmh.’

‘I first left Ngam with my mother for that was the best place for him. But with Ma gone, Ngam has no other person besides me. Tell me my daughter, was I wrong to bring him here?’

‘You were right,’ said Akwen with mixed emotions. ‘Mami the problem is that he seems to be the only person you now care about.’

Minna shook her head and began to tell Akwen about her trip to Douala, Dorothy’s current situation, the cult and their possible diabolical plans and finally about the francophone woman. Minna went on to explain the implications of what her lawyer friend had said about Ngam’s civil status and how Dorothy’s child could be legally handed to some crook who knew how to manipulate the country’s porous judicial system. ‘Tell me then my daughter, how you would feel if you came home one day and discovered that your cousin had been kidnapped or handed to some opportunist who might even be a child trafficker.’

‘God no go gree!’ said Akwen, raising her hands. ‘Don’t just say it Mami. Nobody is going to take Ngam away. Auntie Dorothy would die if she hears.’

‘That is the way I feel too, my dear. And that is why I am so particular about Ngam.’

‘But Mami you should have told me all this before. I would have ignored the vacation and stayed behind to care for the child with you. God will protect him, Mami.’

‘Amen,’ muted Minna, feeling as if a very large log of wood had been lifted from her head. Not only had she won one daughter to her side she had also succeeded in relieving some of the pain in her chest. Why could her Tee not be as understanding as her daughter?

‘Can we go to the market now,’ said Minna to her daughter at the end of the discussion.

‘To the market? And keep Ngam where?’

‘We’ll take him along.’ Minna could see her daughter was even more scared than her. ‘I’ll strap him on my chest. I have bought one of these things that I see women these days strap their babies in. I hear they call them pouches. Nobody would dare touch him.’

‘Mami. I don’t think that is a good idea.’

Minna laughed. ‘While we have to be watchful, we don’t have to fear to the extent of fearing our shadows. The child needs the air anyway.’ Minna was surprised to find she was suddenly filled with some courage. She definitely would have agreed with her daughter a couple of hours before. But here she was prepared to take Ngam out and not being scared.

‘If you say so,’ said Akwen with uncertainty. ‘What then is my own in that market? Just a basket carrier?’

‘Isn’t it a privilege to carry your mother’s basket?’

‘Not anymore. I have to be paid.’

Minna opened a fist in Akwen’s hand. Akwen screamed when she saw a ten thousand francs note staring at her. She could not remember when she last saw this kind of money. ‘For me Mami?’

Minna smiled. It was going to work. ‘Mmh. For being a good girl and having passed your promotion exams. We should be going in ten minutes.’ Minna led the way into the house.

Akwen did not stop singing and dancing as she set about dressing up. This was more than enough compensation for the gala she had missed. Akwen clearly knew this was plain bribery and she wished they could be bribing her like this forever.

Minna wore a bright sleeveless blouse over black slacks while Akwen shone in a pink, fitting midi gown. Both women were appropriately dressed for a Saturday morning weather that was bright and sunny but not too hot. Ngam was in a pouch and strapped to Akwen’s chest. Akwen was not going to have her mother carrying a child while they were together in public. People would think she was an irresponsible girl.

They took a taxi and stopped at Sister Samba’s place. Sister Samba met them at the door, looking chic in a lace blouse and wrappa combination. ‘Don’t tell me you are going just to the market in these,’ said Minna in admiration.

‘It’s not really the market. Just that I have to meet someone there who wants to give me the contract to supply the food and drinks for a party.’

‘A business meeting eh? Chief Executive Officer.’ Minna crackled with laughter.

‘Of Sister Samba and Son’s.’ Sister Samba broke her own lungs too. ‘Eh I beg, what can I do for you? My personal secretary just called to say my client has arrived.’ Sister Samba bounced away like she was on a catwalk. The laughter broke out again.

‘Secretary indeed! I beg, go. I need some plantain leaves.’ There was a bush of plantains in sister Samba’s backyard. Minna mopped her face with the back of her hand.

‘What are you cooking? Because anything cooked in plantain leaves is my die.’

‘Sorry my sister, long-throat go kill you. Don’t worry, I will send your own coki-corn.’

‘Oho. We are going to write it out as a legal agreement. My plantain leaves for three bundles of coki-corn. Tell your daughter to write it out and I will sign. You hear Akwen.’ Sister Samba held Akwen by the shoulder.

‘My daughter is not a lawyer, greedy woman.’

‘Listen to the beggar. Since when did beggars start giving conditions? I beg, just go. I have to run.’ Sister Samba was now serious. ‘But why don’t we go together and leave Akwen with my Berri to harvest the leaves and even warm them. That way, the leaves

would not tear before you get to the house. Unless it's super marketing that you are out for.'

Minna looked at her daughter waiting for her to answer.

'It's okay. I'll stay behind with Ngam.'

'Are you sure?' asked Minna sensing her daughter's reluctance.

Akwen nodded. She actually had a double mind. While she would have liked to accompany her mother, she also liked to be alone when spending her money. Her mother always had a way of imposing on her when it came to buying things for herself, and especially clothes which was what she had decided to spend the money on. Her mother's choices were usually at variance with her own.

'Stay in the house,' Minna warned. 'Don't go into the bar with the child.'

'Yes Madam,' said Minna smiling.

'I am dead serious.'

'Leave the girl alone Minna,' entered Sister Samba. 'She is not a child. In a year's time this woman would be in the university. Don't treat her as if she was born yesterday.'

'Tell her, auntie,' went Akwen with delight. 'She still thinks I am in her stomach.'

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As the girls were warming the leaves, a child came to kitchen to tell Berri that some men were at the door of the bar desperate for a drink. Berri left Akwen alone in the smoke-filled firewood kitchen to check on them. There were three of them and not only were they special customers who often spent till their fat pockets were dry, one of them was especially dear to her. Berri had no choice but to open the bar.

When Berri came back to the kitchen, Akwen was through with the leaves and was wrapping them up. The animated look on the girl's face did not go unnoticed. 'An angel visited you or something?' said Akwen, astonished. A couple of minutes before, Berri was sulking and cursing for being subjected to an unexpected chore and in a smoke-filled kitchen.

'Let us get the hell out of this kitchen. Thank God you are through.' Berri dived into the house without waiting for Akwen.

Akwen was not sure what was going on but placed the leaves in a basket and went after Berri. She sat on a couch where Ngam had been having a good sleep. She began to admire the pictures on the wall when Berri's sharp voice broke from the corridor.

'Let's go to the bar.'

Minna turned and saw but a different girl. No, a beauty pageant. In just a couple of minutes, Berri was transformed. She was exquisitely made up, her hair that had been wrapped under an old headtie now hung in glossy braids over her shoulders and she wore tight shorts and a navel length blouse that thoroughly clinched a curve-linear frame. Akwen kept staring and could not find the voice to speak. Her mother would kill her in these.

'How do I look?' said Berri proud of the effect of her makeover.

'Exposed,' replied Akwen nervously. Berri could think she was being jealous. Quite frankly, she somehow admired her.

'That's the idea, isn't it? Come on let's go.' Berri went towards the door.

Akwen stood up then sat down again. 'You heard my mother now? I can't go there.'

'Forget about them Minna,' Berri waved a dismissive hand in the air. 'This is our own time, big girl. They did theirs when they were our age. We have to enjoy ourselves now before getting ourselves thrown in that prison called marriage. Besides, this is what they did before they met their husbands.'

'Did what exactly?'

Berri cut a side-glance at Akwen. 'You think I am putting on all these for nothing? Don't tell me you haven't guessed already.'

Akwen wanted to enquire further then the idea struck her. She slapped a hand across her mouth. She could not believe she was hearing this from a girl she used to assume was

naïve to the point of being stupid. Akwen was instead the one who now felt naïve and stupid. 'Go. I will stay and watch over the child.'

'We can take the child along.'

Akwen shook her head resolutely. 'My mother warned me.'

'Mother, mother, mother,' Berri mocked. 'Do you realise that you could also be a mother. You have to grow up Akwen and stop being a baby all the time.'

'I am not a baby,' Akwen snapped. 'And you don't have to insult me.'

'I am sorry. I didn't mean to insult you. Actually, I need you. I need your company. I have a special friend out there and he has asked me to join him.'

'Him?' Akwen pretended to be shocked. 'A boy?'

'Yes a boy,' said Berri with some angry passion. 'What do you think I have been talking about all this while? Don't tell me you don't have a boyfriend at this age.'

Akwen bowed her head then threw her hands in the air. She didn't have. 'But why do you need me? I'll be a nuisance.'

'He is not there alone. I need your moral support.'

Akwen eyed the girl with a wrinkled face. 'I hope you are not trying to be very smart.'

'I don't know what you mean but if you think I am trying to set you up with one of them, then you are wrong. I don't even know these boys. I am sure my person just wants to show off to them. You know how boys are.'

Akwen smiled and shook her head. 'Okay, let's go. But I am going to kill you if something bad happens.'

'Nothing will happen,' Berri sang with a triumphant smile. 'We are just going to share a drink and that's all.' Without waiting for any further questions, Berri went and picked up Ngam who was still sleeping and went ahead with him. Akwen ran into the toilet, arranged her tousled hair and brushed off specks of ash on her body. In trepidation, she went after Berri.

At the door, Akwen saw them huddled over a table by the counter. They were drinking in earnesty, ripping the air with loud noises. She was even horrified to see Berri drinking beer and with all pleasure. She hid herself behind the door and leaned against the wall. This was not good.

There was something sinister about this group. There was something sinister about Berri especially. The fact that these boys came only when Sister Samba had gone out indicated some premeditated plan. Berri had plotted her map very well and now Akwen was going to get entangled. No, she was going to resist any attempt at getting her mixed up. She did not want any trouble again with her mother. She took a deep breath and approached the group with caution.

Akwen's heart almost snapped into two when she realised that the only spare seat on the table was between two of the boys; far away from where Berri sat. That was deliberate. Clearly, Berri's game plan and she was getting sucked with her eyes opened. Daughter of the devil, Akwen thought of Berri.

One of the boys had his hand wrapped possessively round Berri's neck and Berri did not show any sign of being embarrassed. Shameless girl! And Ngam was in her arms. Akwen wished she could find a polite way of taking Ngam and running back to the house. The atmosphere was not conducive in the least. But she had lost control of her best faculties. Like a humble slave, she joined the group.

'This is my very good friend, Akwen,' Berri made the introduction, cutting a telling eye at Akwen. Since when did the good friendship start? Akwen barely knew Berri but nevertheless shook hands with all the boys, throwing a functional smile and reluctantly taking the seat that was unoccupied. The trap.

She sat heavily, leaning against the back of the chair and folding her arms across her chest. She kept her eyes fixed at Ngam who with eyes now wide opened was relishing a rare treat of coke. Akwen knew Ngam would blow the roof with his voice if she attempted to take him away. And he would have been the best excuse for her to run away. She just kept

quiet and still though sensing that the two boys sitting by her were casting intensive eyes at her. Which of them had Berri sold her to? She wished she could fly away.

Within a couple of minutes, Akwen knew which of them was going to be her master for he was the one who offered her a drink. She took a coke in spite of the boy's insistence that she went for a beer like Berri. She was not going to fall for the evil intention of the boy. Get her drunk and get his way with her. Her good mother had told her all the tricks.

Handsome? Yes, he was and he had a silky tongue too. Her curt and practically rude attitude did not dissuade him one bit. It instead seemed to intensify his appetite to know more. Only a couple of minutes with the boy and Akwen began to feel guilty with the monosyllabic responses she kept giving him. The boy nevertheless persisted in trying to peruse the chapters of her life.

Before long, Akwen's mouth began to flow like a waterfall. She did not know whether she gave too much away but at least the boy got to know her three names, her school and the size of her family. But, she was not going to open up very intimate details of her life to a crowd. That was the one thing she was at least still conscious of.

Suddenly, Berri and the two other boys stood up and moved away to a different table. Akwen also stood up but the boy held her lovingly by the hand, causing her knees to buckle and she collapsed back on the chair. Yes, finally, they had got her. Berri had played it well. If Akwen had Ngam, she would have pinched him to cry and use that as an excuse to take flight. Ngam however was happily lodged in Berri's seductive arms, far away from Akwen's reach.

The boy was slick and more charming than the serpent. He had the right words and right temperament that could unlock the most intractable puzzle. Soon, Akwen found herself laughing and feeling some warmth where there had been freezing cold. His hand that came on her back felt like tender flames that burnt away all her inhibitions. She actually found herself wanting to listen to his baritone voice forever while leaning her head against his broad chest. Before long, she got lost in some sanctuary she had never known existed.

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Minna separated from her friend only after they had had over an hour of mirth-filled conversation in a boutique where Sister Samba met her customer. Minna did laugh until she almost forgot what she had come to the market for. Luckily for her, there was still enough fresh corn in the market. She also bought other articles for the house and by the time she was through with the buying, she discovered to her shock that over three hours had elapsed.

Akwen and Ngam! She felt hot pulsations of blood on her temples. She did not trust her daughter. Akwen, in spite of her age still remained a very impressionable girl and could easily be distracted by very trivial things. If Minna had known that she was going to leave Akwen and the child behind at Sister Samba's place, she would have preferred them to stay behind but in their own house. Theirs had at least a fence, which could act as some significant barrier against anyone with depraved ideas. Sister Samba's place was as exposed as an antelope on a grassless, lion-infested plain.

Instead of jumping into a normal taxi that already had passengers, she hired one all to herself. She wanted to avoid the waste of time that would arise consequent on the dropping of other passengers. The driver seemed to understand her predicament as he wove his car down the congested streets with remarkable speed.

Minna was out of the car before the driver could park properly. She dashed round the bar and straight to the house. The door was wide ajar and she entered. There was nobody in sight nor the indication of any human presence. Her heart was going to fall out of her mouth. She had given her daughter specific instructions not to leave the house. She threw both hands over her chest and heard the noises coming from the bar. No. Akwen could not dare, she tried to convince herself but decided she should meet Berri in the bar to find out more.

The first person she saw when she crossed the door was Akwen, dancing in and out of the hands of a strange boy. Not her Akwen. Her innocent Akwen. She could not have gone this far. Where was Ngam? She looked around but saw no other familiar face. Not even that of Berri. There were some ten odd persons in the bar and none of them looked familiar. Minna rushed straight towards her daughter who still did not notice her until she made a deliberate cough.

Akwen dived out of the boy's arms, almost tumbled over but managed to stagger forward and fall against the beer counter. 'Mami I am sorry,' she stammered, her hands covering her mouth.

Minna looked from the boy to her daughter with deadly red eyes. 'I don't have time for you, you prostitute.' She raised a hand in the air. 'Where is my child?'

Akwen's eyes flashed around with stunned celerity. 'Where the hell is Berri?'

'Shut up and give me my child this moment.' Minna marched towards her daughter but Akwen ran away.

'Where is my child, you careless girl. I want him this minute.' Air was coming out of Minna's mouth in feverish gusts.

Akwen cast her eyes in an urgent round again, her face furrowed up as if the skin on it was about to come off. 'I don't...'

'Don't even let me hear that or I'll kill you this minute. Get him for me.' Minna began to weep, whipping her hands by her sides as she made towards the private room that was attached to the bar. She nearly collapsed at the sight before her. Berri was lying on the legs of another boy and Ngam was in the arms of the very francophone woman who was sitting intimately close to no other person but the almighty Bridget.

'Hey!' Minna cried, raising her hands heavenwards.

Bridget froze then got up to her feet. She wanted to speak but the words did not come out. Berri flew away from the boy. Weeping and whipping her hands in the air, she snatched herself out of the room and fled. The boy, stunned by the abrupt changes, stood up with quizzing eyes. But he was not sure what question to ask. The francophone woman was the only person who seemed unfazed by all the brouhaha. She sat in a relaxed mood, exchanging niceties with Ngam. She made as if Minna's presence was of no consequence.

Minna jumped on her and without uttering a single word, seized Ngam away. The woman still did not make as if things had changed. She instead cut a sarcastic smile and clapped her hands as if appreciating a stage performance. 'Madam, I tell you *zis bébé* iz not for you but mine. Not far now you will see truth. *Au nom de Dieu.*'

Minna stopped by the door and made a sharp turn, just in time to see Bridget nudging the woman with a knee. She had wanted to blast the woman with one biting invective but the words were sucked out of her by Bridget's curious action. Minna spat on the floor, clasped the child with all her might and stumbled out of the room. She stepped past her daughter who had been standing by the door and watching the drama unfold. 'Your father is going to hear of this,' Minna swore at her daughter and went alone into the taxi.

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Minna was trembling all over as the vehicle took her to her house. That was the safest place in her world. She leaned against the fence, the child still clutched protectively against her chest as the driver single-handedly unloaded his boot. It was only after the taxi had disappeared that she felt at ease to sit Ngam on a cardboard box of groceries to get the key from her handbag.

There was no key. She searched and searched in vain. Then she remembered. The silly girl had it. If only she knew, she would have ignored Sister Samba's suggestion and gone to the market with Akwen and Ngam. Something had told her it was a bad idea but she had been too shy to speak her mind. She had never trusted her daughter's ability to be firm in the presence of others. Why had she not been more courageous? See what trying to be nice



had brought her? What if those women had even conspired and stolen the key from her useless daughter who surrendered herself to the vain boy?

Her Akwen! Cavorting with a boy in public! She slapped a hand on her chest. She had never seen her daughter with a boy before and had been satisfied that her daughter had simply been respecting strict parental instructions. What had suddenly come over Akwen? Could it be possible that her Akwen had been messing about all the time and hiding it? Dorothy's lessons from long ago? Minna did not even want to think of it.

One of her primordial duties as a mother had been to ensure that her daughters preserved themselves until they were ripe for serious relationships. What she had just witnessed her daughter perform had no seriousness about it. What she saw was nothing but frivolous indulgence that could lead to unwanted pregnancy and heaven forbid, AIDS. Minna carried her head in her hands and wailed like a mad woman. Was she failing as mother?

She pushed with despair against the gate in a futile attempt to think more positively. No chance for her. Ngam had fallen off the box and was crying. She rushed and picked him up and rocked him. The tears on his face again brought into prominence the reality that the situation of the child was of more urgent concern than Akwen's excesses. Where was the stupid girl with the key for the child to be taken in and fed?

Of even greater importance, was the question of the child's safety. What was Minna going to do to keep the child away from the tentacles of the francophone who perhaps was colluding with Bridget and perhaps, the cult?

'It's getting above me,' Minna cried in the face of the child, wishing someone could give her the right answers. But first, she had to get into her house. She arranged her things by the gate and walked back to the main street with the child. As she was about to hail a taxi, she saw Akwen running up the road. There was this urgency about her, which frightened Minna.

Minna was waiting for the worse only for Akwen to wave the key in her face. The girl looked like she was about to collapse and die but Minna was not going to forgive her. Not yet. What Akwen had committed was so serious that the simple phrase "I am sorry" would not do anybody any good. Minna had to give her a good talk down first. Then her father also before Minna could be satisfied.

Tetang came home earlier than usual. Immediately he stepped into the house, Minna was on him to complain about their daughter. But Tetang was not in the mood to listen. He waved a hand in the air and walked off to their bedroom. Minna stood on the spot, stunned. She could not believe that she had something this important to say to her own husband and he dismissed her off as if she was nothing but a nuisance. This was unbearable. Was it not enough that for long he had been ignoring her and barely eating her food and she had kept dutifully quiet? She was not going to stomach it anymore. Time she stopped being the dumb wife. She went after him.

She met him lying spread-eagle on the bed, his hand covering his face. A sign of total distress but Minna's own distress was worse. 'I was trying to tell you something very bad that our daughter has committed and you waved me off?'

Tetang did not flinch.

'I am talking to you, Tetang Fru.'

Still no reaction.

'I have had it to the brim with this attitude of yours. Why not just tell me to get lost if you don't want to listen even to the sound of my voice.'

Tetang took his hands off his face for an instance. 'Get lost.'

'I beg your pardon?' Minna could not believe it.

Tetang turned over and buried his face on the bed. Minna made a series of inordinate curses and stormed out of the room. She dived back in, picked up her phone and went to the backyard. She dialled Dimo's number. She did not even wait for all the introductory niceties before starting to parrot relentlessly all the pain that Dimo's brother had caused

her. She did not even give Dimo the chance to ask any question for clarifications. Dimo just listened passively as Minna poured all the venom that was in her stomach. She was panting when she had had her say.

The phone almost fell out of her hand when Dimo made the stunning revelations. Two of the men who had offered Tetang the contract had been thrown behind the walls of a maximum security prison for massive fraud. They had both been senior officials of a parastatal corporation that sank into bankruptcy due to the financial misdeeds of some senior officials.

The men were accused of having siphoned public money to invest in real estate business. Consequently, the project that Tetang had ably handled had to be confiscated by the state. Dimo went on to reveal how Tetang had had to bribe heavily not to be taken away when the security people that came on the site discovered he was a civil servant working on a lucrative private job during working hours.

Minna felt rotten when she clicked off the phone. How could she have been so insensitive? It never rained but poured, Minna remembered the saying and went back to meet her husband. Slowly, she slipped in by him and wrapped an arm around him. He lay still, still on his stomach but with his face turned to the wall. 'I am sorry, darling,' Minna whispered pressing her face on his back. 'Dimo has just told me. I am very sorry.'

After a couple of minutes of quiet reflections, Minna left him to go into the kitchen. Fish pepper soup was what he needed if not to revive his spirits, then at least to warm him up a bit. She called Akwen who was in the firewood kitchen, trying to make up for her bad behaviour by commencing the coki-corn preparation all by herself.

Minna could not understand why Tetang did not want to tell her what exactly had happened. He was not just talking to her at all. Whenever she tried to talk to him, he would reply curtly and move away from her. He ate very little and very often, alone. He would sit by himself for hours under the plum tree reading this or that and then gazing at the horizon. He paid more attention to Rita and Akwen, and even then, on very predictable father and daughter trivia.

She had not yet resolved the issue of Akwen's reckless behaviour, which still prickled her each day. She was yet to have a settled mind on how best to keep Ngam safe. Now, with a husband who had chosen to live like a secluded monk, having moods that swung from reticence to outright detachment, she just had to fear she was inching towards the grave.

The last straw however came when she had another tense call from her brother-in-law. 'I am washing my hands off your sister's case. Those people are really monsters. Their tentacles are closing in on me. I have to run before they destroy me. Wash your hands too. I thought I was tough but I have realised we are too small to fight them.' That was all. Brief and with no room for any question.

Moreover, the number that Minna saw on her phone was not Dimo's. He must have called from a call box. Was he scared the people were monitoring his calls? Minna wanted to call back but thought better of it. If he did not use his phone then he was sending a message she should not call his number. What was Dorothy plunging the whole family into?

Tetang was in the room reading a newspaper when Minna received the call in the in-house kitchen. She was not going to bear this alone. She could not. She joined her husband in the room.

He did not flinch even when she came and stood over him. 'Tetang, Dimo just called.'

The same detached silence.

Minna could bear it no more. She seized the paper from his hand and he jumped up with violence, almost slapping her.

'Slap me,' cried Minna. 'It would be better for you to slap and curse me if I have done something wrong than kill me with this cold attitude. Slap me Tee. That would tell me you are still alive. Why do you have to be bottling things up and keeping me out? Did you marry me to throw me away at this age? How many times have you been reminding me that marriage is sharing and here you are swallowing your own words?'

Tetang walked away to the open window, head bowed.

'You have to talk to me, Tetang,' Minna followed him. 'It's more than a week now you haven't said a full sentence to me. What have I done wrong, Tee?'

Tetang dipped a hand in the pocket of his trousers, pulled out a scrap of paper and handed it to Minna without looking at her. 'See what you and your sister have cost this family.'

*Thank your wife and brother for this. Warn them to keep off!*

'But I don't understand,' said Minna, folding the scrap of paper.

'What don't you understand? English or the message?'

'Calm down, Tee.'

'I am not going to calm down. You want me to talk now, don't you? I am going to talk.'

'But lower your voice,' Minna pleaded.

'For what? Will it change anything? We have lost a fortune because of you people. Our dream, you have killed it. I've worked hard, sparing no effort and I was sure that we were going to touch gold in the very nearest future. But what do we have? A wife and sister

doing all in their power to thwart all the efforts.' With the back of his hand, Tetang wiped the corners of his mouth.

'You have won, haven't you? We have lost everything. All the effort I have put has been in vain. We are not going to receive a franc. The cheque that was handed to me, bounced. Yes, it bounced like a basketball into an abyss. And I might be facing jail. They know I am a civil servant and it is illegal to have another job on the side. That makes you and your sister happy, doesn't it?'

Minna felt as if a sledgehammer had hit her. 'How can you say such things,' she began to weep.

'Oh no! You are not going to make me feel sorry for you. I won't.' Tetang walked away from her and stood by the door. 'Dimo told me all. Dorothy and her society are very determined to keep their business secret but you, the all-powerful patriot must defend your country single-handedly and dismember goliath. No diabolical society is going to hold hostage your nice country. And it doesn't matter if us the dwarfs that make up your family are trampled upon in your fight to keep your country strong.'

'That is preposterous, Tee,' lamented Minna amidst tears. 'I can't believe you are saying such things.'

'I warned you to keep away from those people. Dimo also did. But you have to fight for your country and rescue a sister who doesn't need any rescuing. She is the one directing her friends on how to persecute us. And this child she sent to us was no innocent act. He was sent here to act as a reliable beacon for Dorothy's soldiers to find us and hit when it was necessary.'

Minna stopped crying and focused eyes of incredulity at her husband. He was beginning to sound like one who was hallucinating. Had he just been fed with some brain-disabling concoction? He was not making any sense to her. 'Tee, are you sure you are all right?'

'Now I am mad, aren't I?' He bellowed, moved away from the wall, and stood askance, his eyes all on his wife. An onlooker would have thought he was about to pounce on his worse enemy. 'I am going to show you how mad I am. That bastard has to leave this house. I am no longer going to carry the sign-post for a society to come and destroy my family, if there is anything still left of it.'

Minna cleared her voice. 'Tee, Ngam is no sign-post and even if he is a bastard, he is my nephew and I have the obligation to take care of him.' Minna forced herself to speak with some control.

'Then not in my house.'

'Don't forget my money is buried in this house also.'

'Now I understand. You want your family to inherit my property even when I am still alive. Or is it that you have conspired with your sister to get rid of me in order that your family can have all I toiled for? No way, woman. I can defend myself very well and it is my children that would inherit my property. Get that into your skull.' Tetang stormed out of the room.

Minna followed. She wanted him to talk more. She was fired for it. He was not going to talk to her like that and get away with it. It was not just some juvenile gibberish he was engaged in as she wanted to imagine at first. There was something deeper coming from the core of his being. She had had enough of it. Whatever was going to happen, should happen. This was not the Tetang she married.

They were both stopped in the corridor by Akwen and Rita. The fear on the girls' faces was quite strong and it shocked them. The adults stopped, recognising the hell they had put their innocent daughters through. But none of them was in a mood to express regret.

'There's a man and a woman at the veranda who want to see both of you,' said Akwen twisting her fingers.

'How did they get in?' scolded Tetang before realising the idiocy of his question.

'I went and opened the gate,' replied Akwen with apprehension.

'Yes of course,' muted Tetang who went ahead. Minna followed immediately.

Leaning on the balustrade was Mr Njotu and Mrs Abbe. They were both looking tense like people on a warpath.

Tetang stood by the door and politely made way for his wife. The hair on Minna's body stood on end. This woman was very determined. 'I thought I warned you to stay away from me and my family?' went the first salvo from Minna

Mrs Abbe looked unperturbed. She instead moved away from the balustrade, exuding confidence. 'I told you zat *bébé* is not your own.' 'Iz my brozza's own.' She tapped Mr Njotu on the shoulder.

'I see,' said Minna taking one step towards the woman. This man now is your brother, isn't he? Anyway, that is none of my business. My business is you coming to my house and making crazy statements. Leave us alone.' Minna's heart was ablaze.

'Yes, I can see ze same pretence. You will know very soon.'

Minna looked from the woman to her husband. 'I think you should leave, now.'

'Yes I leave. My brozza finish, I leave. But I come back and take my *bébé*, soon.' The woman frowned.

Mr Njotu held the woman by the hand to calm down. 'I just have one thing to say to your husband.' He was looking at Minna. 'Warn him to stay away from Bridget.'

Minna was hit by a sudden biting cold. She flung sharp eyes at Tetang and could have swallowed him that moment if she was a python. Tetang's eyes popped out from their sockets as if they had been hammered from inside his skull. He choked with rage and could not speak.

'What did you say?' squealed Minna, cocking her ear in Mr Njotu's direction.

'Yes, tell him Bridget is mine. He has you. There is no reason why he still wants Bridget. Bridget has told me all the moves he has been making. Tell him, I am up to the challenge.'

'Talk to me,' interrupted Tetang, moving closer to Mr Njotu. 'Talk to me. Not to my wife or are you scared of me. I am here very present and my ears are in good form.'

'I had asked you politely to keep away from her.'

'Your imagination really takes you places, doesn't it? For the umpteenth time, I am going to repeat it. Your ugly Bridget doesn't excite me in any way. I have nothing whatsoever to do with her and it will never happen. Now, both of you get out of my compound. You are lucky that it is my daughter who came and opened the gate. I wouldn't have let you people in to come and contaminate the air here with your filthy presence. Get out.' Tetang was almost nose-to-nose with the man, vapour steaming out of his nostrils.

'No need for zis now?' said Mrs Abbe, dragging Mr Njotu by the hand. 'My brozza is not strong like you. He very sick. Take easy, yah? We go but we come back again not like zis.' The woman began to move, dragging Mr Njotu.

'Was that a threat there?' said Tetang skipping from the veranda to the yard.

'More than that,' went a defiant Mr Njotu. 'It's a promise.'

'Then I am waiting for you.' Tetang followed them right to the gate. When he returned, Minna was still standing on the spot, hands folded over her chest and face rippled over. She had her eyes steady on him as he approached. Her chest was bobbing up and down as if she was about to explode.

Tetang stopped briefly by her, said nothing, and then went inside. Minna stood staring at the gate. Water began to leak out of her eyes again. The sky had collapsed on her.

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Minna was actually trembling as if she had a fit of fever. Her lips were dancing and her teeth were chattering. She tried to move her legs but they felt as if they had been manacled and chained to one of the concrete pillars that supported the balusters. She managed to reach the wall on which she threw her head, ignoring the damage it was going to do to her hair. No, it could not be true.

She remembered all the other encounters with Bridget. Bridget had used Tetang to insult her in the restaurant. And Tetang had not been as bitter as Minna had expected after

she had reported Bridget's attack. "Tell your husband to keep out of my business." Minna recalled Bridget's determined voice in all vividness at the salon.

At the nightclub, Tetang had not been prepared to accept Minna's suspicions that Bridget could have stolen their drinks. Tetang had been very economical with words when telling her about the visit he had made to Njotu's place as well as the first visit Njotu did make to their home. Then there was the letter. And now, Njotu's final outburst.

What further evidence did Minna need. Sister's Samba's words now sounded like a deliberate ploy at placating any retaliatory moves on Minna's part. Could her friend also be part of the conspiracy? The way Sister Samba had hammered on the issue did no longer seem as innocent as Minna had assumed.

Sister Samba was anyway not the issue for Minna. The issue was the double-faced cheat who had found it convenient to cast her as the criminal whereas he was the depraved oaf, specialised in sneaking down seedy streets to consort with harlots. He was not going to get away with it. Not this time. She had given a deaf ear for too long. She wiped her eyes and went after him into their bedroom.

Tetang was forcing a tee shirt over his head when Minna entered. 'Where are you going?' she said.

'Out.' Tetang bent down to buckle his sandals.

'Out to where?'

'None of your business.'

'Oh yes it is my business. It is my business where you go. Going to see Madam Bridget, are we? She is the one who runs you body and soul now, isn't it? You filthy hypocrite and you have the audacity to come and accuse me of unimaginable things. It was a ploy at pre-emption, wasn't it? You adulterous father. No wonder your daughter is following your example. I am not surprised you didn't want to hear me talk about what she did. Hypocrite!'

'Are you through?' Tetang raised his head, stood up and adjusted his clothes. Making as if there was nobody else in the room, he walked out. If she had a rope, Minna would have hanged herself. She wanted to go after him but by the corner of her eye, saw a better way out. The car keys were lying on her dressing table. She snatched them and went into the toilet. She opened the lid on the reservoir of the water closet and on top of a pipe, dropped the keys. Carefully, she placed back the lid.

A couple of minutes later, Tetang was pounding his way back into the room. Concentrating hard, he turned everything in the room upside down but to no avail. He searched the pockets of all his clothes, dragged the bed to one side and turned all the contents of his brief case on the bed. He hit his head with his fingers but was none the wiser. Then in desperation, he turned to Minna. 'Give me my keys.'

Minna who was sitting on the chair by her dressing table, did not respond. It was her turn to pay him back and in his own coins.

'You think you have done what Idi Amin failed to do?' With that, he stormed out of the room again, grumbling down the corridor. Minna smiled a wicked one. Perhaps from that he could understand how she felt being snubbed.

Tetang went out but his time on foot. Minna knew he was not going to have it easy for he always felt restricted when he was out without the car. She was going to wait for him.

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The tension in Minna kept mounting and the person she would have trusted most to help her was not as trustworthy as before. Any man who cheated on his wife was as good as no man at all. The only other person Minna could think of was her friend. But after the interventions she had had from her friend, the option did not sound inviting. Best friends could sometimes be envious and transfer a problem from the frying pan into red-hot flames. But what other alternative did Minna have?

She urgently needed somebody on whom she could pour her woes. If not she would explode and die. She could not think of any other reliable person besides Sister Samba. All

she needed was just an attentive ear. Advise on what to do was no longer necessary. She already knew what she was going to do. She actually locked the gate and took the key for Akwen or Rita to stay put with the child until she came back. She hailed a taxi and went straight to Sister Samba.

As Minna alighted from the taxi, there was Mrs Abbe, Bridget and Njotu coming out of the bar. The last people she wanted to see at that moment of her life. They were all looking so bright and happy. That incensed Minna all the more. People who had made her miserable should not be having any peace.

She felt like rushing towards them and shouting some obscenities. But that would only confirm to the world that she was mad as Tetang had implied. Why would they leave all the bars in Nkwen, where they lived to come and drink in Sister Samba? Minna wondered and hid behind a fence.

What Minna saw after was even more numbing. That was her so-called best friend walking the evil three to the road and having the laugh of her life. Minna could not remember the last time she saw that kind of laughter coming from her friend. What were these people doing with her friend and in such good spirits? Did they not know Sister Samba was her best friend? Had Sister Samba began to connive with them?

Minna placed a hand against her vibrating chest as Sister Samba embraced these people before they boarded a taxi. It could not just be a business gambit on Sister Samba's part, thought Minna. There was clearly something deeper than customer cuddle behind all the camaraderie. Could Minna ever count again on Sister Samba's loyalty as her best friend? Minna waited until Sister Samba had entered the bar before coming out of hiding.

'What a day!' That was Sister Samba's warm greetings as Minna entered the bar. Too warm, Minna thought.

'Those were my enemies coming out of your place sister?' Minna did not waste any time.

Sister Samba stammered before articulating her thoughts. 'That was the first time Minna noticed her friend could not make a spontaneous response. 'They came just for a drink. This is a public place, Minna.'

The voice sounded very contrite, giving credence to Minna's suspicions that there was something hidden behind the apparently innocuous words. 'This is the second time I have encountered them in your place and the first encounter was to say the least, troubling. And you have not reacted since.'

Sister Samba led Minna to an empty table by the counter. The bar was almost half-full. Sister Samba gave the order for two soft drinks. The women did not speak to each other until they had had a sip of their drinks.

'Minna,' began the bar proprietor, 'I know where you are coming from, but don't forget I am a business woman.' She avoided Minna's eyes and Minna noticed it.

'I never said the contrary but my being close to you is certainly not hinged just on the fact that you are a business woman. And you very well know it is from that perspective that I said what I just said. Well, if you tell me those people came just for business, that wouldn't bother me. But after the first encounter, you can understand why I am concerned.'

Sister Samba nodded. 'When you saw me smiling when you just came, it was all business oh. At least you can rejoice with me for having had the luckiest week in my business now?' Sister Samba raised her glass and touched Minna's glass. Her face really showed a joy that was spilling out without control like hot volcanic magma.

'Na jackpot you touch?' said Minna, trying to force herself to be cheerful. Had she been too harsh?

Sister Samba lost her reserve. 'Ma sister! You see that francophone woman? She doesn't spend less than twenty thousand every time she comes here. And she is always coming with people. Whole chicken, roast fish, bush meat, expensive wines, what have you, she buys. She doesn't even try to beat the price like most other customers. She removes the cash and pays without question. With customers like her, I'll be a millionaire soon.'



'Na ya own fine,' said Minna, mirthlessly. She had no reason to smile. 'I am truly happy for you. I wish I could say that for myself.'

'I know Minna, but just celebrate with me even for one second. Tomorrow may be your own day to celebrate, who knows. And I guarantee you, I will empty this bar myself.'

Silence ensued and it was easy to see that both women were not feeling comfortable. It wasn't like them to feel awkward in each other's company. Minna decided to break the tension. 'Sister, I am sorry for cornering you like that. You don't owe me any explanation about the type of people you meet and where you meet them. Not the least in a business place like yours that is open to all.'

Sister Samba raised her face. 'If you want to talk about friends and the real meaning of it, I have only one in this world. And it's you. You are the one person I have come across who is real and genuine. You don't have airs like other women of your calibre. You don't pretend when something touches you and you have a big heart that I wish I could have. I try to copy it the way you do but I don't have your tolerance. You are the one person I know I can bet my life on. I will never do anything that goes against your interest, Minna.'

'I never meant it that way, Sister.'

Sister Samba shook her head vigorously. 'You were right. I mean your reaction. And that is why I say I admire you. You know, when you keep a lie in your heart, it multiplies like a virus and soon consumes the very heart. That is why these days, droves of people are dying. Hypertension and heart failures are now in command. We stock ourselves with falsehood and show a fabricated façade to the world. I must confess I have one, which is really killing me, and it concerns you. It has to do with these people and that is why I feel badly guilty.'

Minna sat forward, placing her elbows on the table.

'Yes,' said Sister Samba nodding her head. 'I had been meaning to tell you but at the same time I also thought I should take some time to try to see if I could sort out the matter. I know what you have been going through my sister and I know it is my responsibility to help you. Please, don't force me to tell you now. I know you already have more than you can chew. Telling you now would be too much and I would feel responsible if something bad happens.'

'Try me Sister,' entreated Minna. 'I am more resilient than you think.'

'Please Minna, be patient. My intentions are in your best interest. I have been meeting with these people whom I know are your enemies. But you know sometimes, it is better to get closer to your enemy in order to find out how to forestall any moves on their part.'

Minna sighed. 'I know I can trust you sister. But at this moment, I am living with such uncertainty that I can do without more lose ends. As I am talking to you like this, my dearest husband is cheating on me. And who is having him? Bridget of all persons. The very Bridget I saw a couple of seconds ago.'

Sister Samba laughed waving a hand in the air. 'Forget am Minna. I know Bridget would die to have your man. I have told you this several times. She has a thing for men who are responsible and have some cash. Especially those who are married. I told you about my own. And you know why she succeeded? First, I was not vigilant but even more crucially, my husband actually ached for it. Bridget is definitely not the kind of woman to trust around your husband. But Minna as I keep telling you, your husband is the real man.'

'Yes, real men like to prove all women are at their feet.'

'No no Minna,' said Sister Samba with confidence. 'No, real men don't cheat but devote their love and energies to their wives and family. That's who Tetang is. I have a business that brings me in contact with a lot of people. I know the cross-section of the Bamenda population. Trust me Minna. I know what I am talking about. What Bridget is doing, is needling you to keep your guards down and when you do like you are now aching to do, she would prowl on your man.'

Minna felt a shiver down her spine. 'And what exactly am I aching to do?'

'Planning to attack him. Accuse him falsely and you are pushing him out of your guarded walls and allowing him to enter the free market.'

'But even Bridget's man, Mr Njotu said it himself. He actually came to my house to warn Tetang today. Just a couple of hours ago.' Minna suddenly did not sound so sure of herself.

Sister Samba shivered. 'He did that?'

Minna, very much against her initial wish went on to narrate all about the visit of Mr Njotu and Mrs Abbe. 'A man would not accuse another one like that if it is not true.' Minna concluded.

Sister Samba shook her head in despair. 'It is all part of Bridget's game plan. She has been driving Albert mad with all kinds of fantasies. Getting him to come over to your place was all part of Bridget's strategy to put a wedge between you and your man. She knows Njotu would kill just to keep her. That is why she is playing her devious cards like she always does. Don't fall a prey to her schemes Minna.'

'How do you know all this,' asked Minna with a suspicious face.

'Mrs Abbe,' stuttered Sister Samba. 'She told me all about Bridget and Albert and the rat and cat game they are playing with their relationship. Albert desperately wants to marry Bridget but Bridget is yet to make up her mind. And that is because she has eyes for other men not the least of which is Tetang. She would have long married Albert if he was as rich as he used to be. She is looking for security.'

'Then why does she have to prey on other woman's husband's?'

'She is a frivolous girl. By that I don't mean she is not dangerous. I can now joke about with her. I have no man at stake. She has reached that age where she is desperate to settle down but she needs the right man. She is even prepared to be a second or even third wife so long as the man is rich. And I suppose that is why she has eyes on Tetang.'

Minna almost laughed. 'Tetang and I signed for monogamy. Means she is probably out to displace me. But whatever the case, doesn't it all depend on Tetang? He is into her so I may soon have to pack my bags.' Minna bowed over the table. All through the years she had been with Tetang, she had never had any reason to suspect him. 'But why should such things be happening only now?' she asked her friend.

'Bridget is taking advantage of the problems you are having concerning the baby, the cult and currently Mrs Abbe. She picks her moment very well.'

'She knows about the cult?' Minna was astounded.

'I am just suspecting. That girl has circumnavigated this country several times. She knows people and knows things that are happening in this country. She spoke a lot about cults which made me believe she knows this particular cult that Dorothy is inside.'

'Aha sister!' exclaimed Minna throwing her hands in the air. 'She is definitely a member. My whole family is in danger.'

'They aren't,' cried Sister Samba. 'I can swear on my life that she is not in the cult. She is too loud-mouthed and transparent to be a member of a cult. Cult people are secretive and calm. Bridget is not the type. She is the voice that must be heard at all times. Every time she comes here, she keeps my customers rapt with never-ending stories. She is not a woman whose every word you have to take seriously though she can transform an obvious lie into a convincing fact. If you are not vigilant, she can even steal your heart from you.'

'And that is good for business, I suppose.' said Minna with some cynicism.

Sister Samba took the slight in her strides. 'I know you don't like the sound of that but it is indeed true. She is good for my business. She was the one who actually brought Mrs Abbe to this place.'

'Probably so that you can tell her about me and my family.' Minna suspected her friend was hiding the juiciest part of the story.

Sister Samba's face dropped. 'I didn't expect that from you Minna.'

Minna quickly apologised. 'Let's forget about Bridget and my husband. It is my husband I am going to tackle as far as Bridget is concerned. You have given me enough tips to

handle him. I know what I am going to do.' Minna sighed and crossed her hands over her chest. She stared quietly over her friend's head wearing a stiff face. 'Sister, what do I do to stop this woman from wanting to grab Dorothy's child? This Mrs Abbe?'

'That is the issue I believe I am going to solve. Leave it to me Minna. I will bring to you results that would make you happy. Mrs Abbe's real problem is that she wants her brother to be settled and happy. She has told me her mind and even confided in me about how she is trying to convince Bridget to marry her brother and quickly. She fears her brother may die soon if he does not marry another woman quickly.'

Minna was not convinced. 'The way that woman is after Ngam makes me believe she would rather die than leave the child with me.'

'Yes she definitely wants that child,' conceded Sister Samba. 'But her real priority for now is getting her brother settled. The woman makes me laugh with her accent. "Ze man, ze brozza."'

Minna felt this digression was an indication her friend wanted the topic changed. She kept quiet, supporting her head with a hand. Her mind was not at peace. Sister Samba had even raised the temperature by several notches with the bits of hints she was divulging with obvious reluctance. She suspected her friend was hiding the juiciest part of the story. Sister why do you think Bridget wanted to talk to me about Ngam?'

Sister Samba lowered her eyes and Minna saw her friend was a bit nervous. She shrugged her shoulders.

Stalling, Minna concluded. 'You know something and you are not telling me.'

Sister Samba took a deep breath and folded her hands over her chest. 'I earlier told you there are things that I know that concern you and these people. The question about Ngam and Bridget is part of it. I also pleaded with you to give me time. Just a bit more time and I will tell you everything. Right now, I am still trying to put the facts together in my mind and when I find that the logic holds firm, I will tell you everything.'

'What logic, sister? Please tell me. I am hanging in the air. There are too many unknowns in my life. You want me to die before telling it?'

'Minna please. You know me very well. I hate saying things that might end up sounding like baseless rumours. Like cheap gossip. I need to be very satisfied my facts are full-proof before exposing them. And especially on an issue like this which is very delicate. Let me assure and reassure you again. Your best interest, is my principal guiding factor. I will eventually tell you but as I said, when I am fully convinced and that your best interest is served. Can we leave it at that Min. Trust me.'

'Okay, Sister,' muted Minna. She took a sip of her drink and frowned.

'I am sick and tired of this sweet water,' said Sister Samba frowning. 'Let me call Berri to bring the beers.' She shouted the order at Berri before Minna could protest.

Minna twisted her face when she saw Berri striding in, holding a tray as if it was a priceless gift. Minna protested again about the beer but her friend was not going to have it. Sister Samba yanked off the cover of Minna's beer and pushed it in front of her. 'One beer wouldn't kill you,' Sister Samba said and sucked from her own bottle.

Minna almost did not hear what her friend was saying for she was watching the deliberate swings Berri was making in a very short skirt. 'I see you have not punished Berri for what I told you she did,' said Minna after the girl had disappeared.

'Forget about her Minna and let's drink.'

'You mean you can tolerate her in those flimsy clothes?'

Sister Samba snorted. 'Minna, sometimes you have to ignore certain things to keep your mind at ease. Between you and I, the world is changing. What you and I consider immoral is chic and okay today. See the way our children dress. They are all over the place half-naked. Society accepts it. Tune to whatever station on the television, it is the same kind of dress we see. You and I alone cannot change it. Besides, Berri is a good waitress. She works hard and my customers like her.'

Minna was shocked. She could not recognise her friend again. Was it that everyone was

changing and she alone was staying on the spot? Was it no longer fashionable to stick to proper principles and fight for them? Money was eating the soul of her friend. 'Don't you see what all these might lead the girl into?'

'Prostitution?'

'It does cross my mind especially when I know she cavorts with the likes of Bridget.'

Sister Samba shook her head. 'No, Berri is a good girl. The boy you saw here with wants to marry her.'

That sealed Minna's mouth. She and her friend were no longer riding on the same wavelength. Minna went back home, still feeling as anxious as before she came to her friend.

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When Auntie Aggie showed up unexpectedly that evening, Minna thought God had sent an angel to come and help her. That was why she clutched on her aunt immediately she opened the door. It was a cold evening with a crimson sea of clouds left behind by a receding sun that hovered over the horizon.

Minna did not realise her aunt was gritting her teeth until she heard grunts emitting from the woman's throat. Minna pulled back and held her aunt by the shoulders. Auntie Aggie was still gritting her teeth and also rubbing the area on her neck where Minna had pressed. It was then that Minna realised her aunt did not look herself. She had lost a lot of weight and the wrinkles on her face had multiplied. In just a couple of months? This was a new bride who should be looking flush and plump. Then Minna noticed the fresh scar on the neck.

'Auntie, somebody tried to slash your neck?' said Minna dragging her aunt in.

'You talk as if it is a joke.' Auntie Aggie spoke as if she had sore throat.

'What happened?' Minna led her aunt gently to a couch.

Auntie Aggie collapsed on the chair, grunting. Before she could say a word, Rita and Akwen rushed in to embrace her. But a hand from her warned the girls not to come closer. They saw the frown on her face and knew she was in pain. 'What happened Auntie,' queried Akwen.

'Just some neck pain,' said Auntie Aggie rubbing the neck. 'I came to see a doctor.'

Minna saw the look on her aunt's face and decided she was not telling the truth. She probably did not want the children to hear. Minna gave the girls some assignment so she could speak to her aunt alone. 'Tell me the whole truth Auntie. I know there is a very good doctor there in Widikum. This visit is not just about a Doctor.' Minna shook her head.

Auntie Aggie held her head in her hands and began to cry. Minna rushed to her side and held her. 'Tell me Auntie.' Minna mopped her face with her open palms.

'It is not what I dreamt of, oh my sister,' began Auntie Aggie amidst sobs. She went on to narrate how the children of her man threatened and beat her and even had their father beaten when he tried to defend her. They drove her out of the compound. She went and reported to Minna's father but because of the influence of Ma's mate, Auntie Aggie had to run back to her husband empty-handed. This time, the man's sons beat her until she fell and gashed her neck on the sharp edge of a bamboo piece. She had to sleep in the clinic in Widikum for two weeks before being permitted to leave the hospital.

The man's sons came to the hospital and warned her that if she ever stepped again in the compound they were going to kill her. That was when she took the decision to leave Widikum for good. 'My dream turned into a nightmare, Minna.'

'Ashia Auntie.' Minna held her aunt, rubbing her back like a child. She allowed her to cry for sometime before posing her next question. 'What then do you intend to do, Auntie?'

'Go back to my father's compound.'

Minna could not believe it. 'The reason why you left in the first place no longer matters?'

'Do I have a choice, Minna?'

Minna remembered she had made a promise to help her aunt set up some business here in Bamenda but the way Tetang was behaving, he would just go mad if he found out he was about to be lumped with yet another member of Minna's family. Dorothy and Ngam were already more than he could chew.

Minna was quietly thankful that her aunt did not invoke the promise. How was Minna going to explain her change of mind without exposing her marital woes? Her aunt in spite of her good heart was a pathological gossip. She was going to broadcast the story to the whole family and would aggravate matters with her current anger.

'I think going home is a good decision,' Minna quickly pointed out, with a wish not to have her aunt stay longer and discover there was tension in the house.

'But I need your help, Minna.'

'Just say it Auntie. Money?'

Auntie Aggie nodded, mopping her face with the back of her hand. 'For transport.'

'That I consider my duty Auntie, not help. There is however one thing that I will like you to do for me. Take Ngam along.'

Auntie Aggie shuddered with shock. 'You surely don't mean it. Ngam?'

Minna turned her face away in uncertainty. 'I don't know what else to do, Auntie.' Minna could not hold her courage for much longer. She burst out sobbing. It was Auntie Aggie's turn to do the consoling, holding Minna against her chest. 'They are trying to kidnap the child and are determined.'

'Who is "they"?'

Minna told her aunt about the cult, about Mrs Abbe and Bridget. She went on to elaborate on her fears about the child's lack of legal status explaining how this could lead to him being taken away by the courts. 'The family would blame me if the child is taken away,' Minna concluded.

'Our stars haven't been kind to us these days, have they?'

Minna rocked her head against her aunt's shoulders. 'I have been a prisoner. I have to stay in all the time to ensure the child is safe. I want you to take the child there for sometime for him to keep an unreachable distance away from them. That would give me the space and time to think of another plan.'

'I understand your situation my sister. I know what I am going to do.' Auntie Aggie pushed Minna away from her shoulder. Minna stopped sobbing and knew her aunt had an explosive idea.

'Minna, Wum is not very far from Bamenda. Those people can easily get there. This has just made me realise I have a better alternative than Wum. I am taking him to Furu Awa.'

Minna was shocked. 'But that place is remote. I hear you trek for days before reaching there.'

'But that is the point, isn't it? The child would be unreachable.'

'I would not be able to check on him. I have to check him from time to time.'

Auntie Aggie bent her head showing signs of disappointment. 'You no longer trust me? You no longer trust my ability to take care of a child and defend your interest?'

Minna's tongue remained glued to her palate. 'I do,' she stammered.

'Then allow me do it this way.'

Minna definitely trusted her aunt but Ngam's situation was such an imbalanced equation that no degree of assumptions could give total confidence it could be solved once and for all. But so far, her aunt was the only person Minna could confidently assume would die for her. 'All right,' she said heavily.

'You have to do better than that Minna.'

'Yes, Auntie,' Minna said with more vigour. 'How are you going to make it in that strange place?'

Auntie Aggie smiled. 'You remember that my aunt, your grandmother's youngest sister? She has retired to Furu Awa with her husband who comes from there. She was the first person who asked me to come over and join her when my man passed away. That woman

loves me. I'll stay just a day or two in Wum and move straight to Furu Awa. I could live there with her forever. And you know what, you can even allow Ngam grow to an age where he can fight for himself before taking him back.'

'And how long will that be?'

'When he is big enough.'

Minna recognised her aunt was putting her again through the test of trust. Minna did not like the open-ended response but her most urgent objective for now was getting Ngam out of the reach of the evil people. It might also bring some peace in her matrimonial home. 'Anything you say Auntie.'

'When can we be going then?' Auntie Aggie was now shining with some new confidence.

'This weekend, maybe. I have to discuss with my husband first.' Minna however, did not look totally satisfied. But this was the best deal she could get out of a very tight situation.

Early in the afternoon of the following day, Dimo's car rolled into the yard with him behind the wheel. Accompanying him were Rogers and Tiffuh. Minna was expecting the children in two weeks' time and was thus surprised to see them coming out of the car with their luggage.

The children looked happy all right but Dimo was a different person. He had cut down and looked pale. His smile was not full and his eyes looked weak. Minna could not hide her shock when she embraced her brother-in-law. 'Was it malaria or what, Dimo and you couldn't call us?'

Dimo sat on the bonnet of his car, folding his arms. His eyes were on the ground. 'Worse than that,' he finally said after Rogers and Tiffuh had disappeared into the house with their screaming sisters. 'Where's big bro?'

'He was taking a shower when you just drove in. What is it now, Dimo? You look like a man who is about to be shot.'

Dimo heaved out a huge volume of air from his lungs. 'I haven't had it easy since you left. Especially of recent.'

'Those people?'

'Who else? I knew they were monitoring me as I was monitoring them. But I really did underestimate their capacity.'

'Let's go and sit down,' said Minna, breathing deeply also. Minna went after him with his light brief case. Minna introduced her aunt to him for the first ever time but his attention was focused more on the child who was in Auntie Aggie's arms. Dimo picked up the child and held him against his chest. 'Is this the child?' he turned to Minna already knowing the answer.

Minna nodded.

It could not be any other answer. 'Handsome boy but boy, you are some trouble.' Dimo pressed the nose of the child with the tip of his finger.

Minna felt awkward. Had Tetang talked to Dimo to also hate the child for the trouble he and his mother had caused? Minna dashed into the kitchen more out of a need to hide her tension than getting something for her guest. She was not going to bear it should Dimo react like his brother.

Rogers was thrilling his sisters with stories about Douala while Minna tried to find out what her kitchen had in store for an important guest.

By the time she succeeded to put together a bowl of fruit salad and a plate of boiled groundnuts, Tetang had joined his brother in the parlour. Tetang had a sensible suggestion: that they do the eating under the plum tree while conversing. A high-stake conversation, Minna thought.

Rogers arranged a set of three chairs under the tree for the adults. The food was placed on a low bamboo table at the centre. The sun kept sailing away, making the weather rather chilly for Dimo who was used to the constant heat of the equatorial south. The leaves of the plum tree swished away to the force of a light breeze. All three ate with little appetite, their minds leaving them to contemplate on their various personal tragedies.

'What did you say happened, Dimo?' said Minna, breaking the silence.

Dimo took the time to swallow before bothering to respond. He looked from his brother to his wife and bowed his face. 'I am on the verge of losing my job.'

'What?' shouted Tetang and Minna in unison, with Minna almost jumping out of her seat.

'I got a serious warning from the board a week ago, promising to terminate me. They say my private life stinks.'

'And what do they mean by that?' said Minna.



'That they have been getting scandalous reports about my private life which according to them is having a negative impact on the image of the bank. I went and saw my manager to tell me what exactly I had done that was so bad. He handed photocopies of two letters to me. They were apparently from two women, both of them claiming I had made them pregnant.'

'But how come the letter got to your boss?' Minna could not believe it.

'He claimed the women just came to his office, gave him the letters and complained bitterly about me.'

'On the same day?'

'No. Apparently about a week apart. Both of them claimed I promised marrying them and when they revealed to me that they were pregnant, I had them beaten and thrown out of my house. They claimed they wanted to drag the matter to court but thought the bank could force me to see sense and reconsider my position.'

For the first time, Tetang raised his voice by laughing. 'But is it true or at least did you have a relationship with the girls?'

Dimo chewed his upper lip. He nodded then added, 'but those are not the only girls I have met and I didn't beat them.'

'Maybe the other ones didn't get pregnant or were not promised marriage.'

Dimo cast hostile eyes at his older brother. 'What in effect I am trying to say is that the whole thing is a plot. My manager hates me for he has heard rumours that the board is considering having him replaced by me. I am more qualified than he and have worked in this very bank longer. All he is doing is trying to destroy me.'

'I don't believe in that conspiracy theory my man,' said Tetang rising from his chair in anger. 'Get married, you will not get married. You go romping about as if you are still a teenager. You forget that you are already above forty. Why wouldn't such things happen when you can't control yourself? Take your responsibility and take one of those women or make a concrete engagement to take the children.'

'Please, I didn't come for any moral lecture. If sharing my problems with the family annoys you, I may as well stop and go my way. It's not as if I don't know what to do. Who are you anyway to give moral lessons? You want us to talk about your own recent scandal?'

Tetang was visibly shaken. 'How dare you?' Tetang turned and faced his brother and cast an even more hostile eye at his wife. Minna had talked to him about Bridget?

Minna got up and stood between them, her face guilt ridden. 'Enough of this. Tee, if you are not interested in the story, I am. You can go and leave us alone. You like to hide things but that doesn't help anyone. We are family and we have to share.' Minna just had to brave it. Tetang had anyway not been a saint of late.

'I am not part of this.' Tetang turned and walked back into the house.

'You see that?' said Dimo rising from his own seat. 'He always has to be clean.'

'Forget about him, Dimo,' said Minna pushing him back to his seat. 'It is the big brother syndrome. Being all self-righteous and pious when talking to a junior. You stung him anyway by your reply and he is running away. Also you must know he hasn't been himself since he lost the contract.'

'That does not give him the right to talk to me anyhow.' Dimo slipped back on his seat with a frown. Minna poured out a glass of water for him, which he drank gratefully.

'How did you find out about the scandal thing?' said Minna with a lowered voice.

Dimo smiled. 'Akwen was always on the phone with her brother and sister. You people had the children worried. I had to ask them and they told me. Who is the woman?'

Minna waved a hand in the air. 'It's not very important. Don't believe all that the children tell you. It's no big issue.' That was a lie but Minna did not want the issue to grow bigger than it already was. Besides, she had already decided how she was going to handle her husband.

'None of my business, I know. My lips are sealed.'

‘Dimo please go ahead about your job. Why should the bank be taking a pretty private matter as bank matter?’

Dimo wiped a hand over his chin. ‘The image of the bank matters and if it comes out in the press that the second in command lives a poor private life, it may make some kind of customers feel uncomfortable. A court case might even worsen matters. We actually have cut-throat competition now in the banking sector and no good bank would like to be left behind. Bankers are supposed to be discrete people who have integrity. I can understand why the board of directors are very worried.’

‘Then why not just go ahead and get a good girl?’

‘I will but in my own time. Me being married or not is not really the problem. The problem is that these girls are being manipulated to destroy me. Wife or no wife, my boss would still be on me. He would look for other ways. Fortunately or unfortunately, I have found out from where the manipulation is being directed. The girls are being used as pawns in a well-orchestrated game of blackmail. My boss is the henchman and though he is happy being that, he doesn’t know he is being used.’

‘You sound very casual about it and at the same time sounding ominous. I am not sure I understand you very well but I would say preserving a job as precious as yours is worth every ounce of your energy. If your boss is being manipulated and he is getting some board members on his side, you should fight to get other board members on your own side. All board members cannot all of a sudden like him. Or are you saying you can’t fight him?’

‘Far from it,’ said Dimo shaking his head. ‘But that is not the point. What I am scared of is the dark hands behind the whole show. If they discover that my boss is not succeeding, they would get to the board members directly and that would be the end of me.’

‘Are we talking here about the cult?’ said Minna, with a sense of *déjà vu*.

‘Exactly,’ said Dimo sipping a glass of water. ‘The Alpha and Omega Temple. They are definitely the ones. I am sorry I had to give up my search for Dorothy. Those beasts are fighting back and they are the more formidable force I must confess.’

Minna’s head fell. ‘You don’t have to be sorry for anything, Dimo. I am the one to be sorry for having got you involved in the first place. I had told you since I left Douala that you should forget about Dorothy and the search. I had long given up knowing my sister was as good as dead. All I have to remember her by is her child. I have reconciled myself to that. I am happy that you have finally given up before those idiots could destroy you. Dorothy is not worth the trouble anymore.’

Minna jumped up as something fell on her foot. She laughed at herself and picked up a black plum that had fallen from the tree. ‘Is this good or bad luck?’ Minna asked her brother-in-law.

‘Mixed fortunes,’ said Dimo absent-mindedly. He really looked like someone who needed help.

Minna felt sorry for him. It was because of her that Dimo had found himself in such a mess. Though she did not know how she could help him, the least she could do was get him to talk out. She sat back on the chair and handed him the plate of groundnuts that he had barely touched. ‘I am a bit curious, Dimo. How did you get to find out the cult was behind you?’

Dimo stretched himself on the back of the chair and sniffed the cool air deeply. ‘Remember the man I told you who revealed the group to me.’

Minna nodded.

‘They nodded out about what he had done. I too had been a bit too frivolous with my tongue. They got him and tortured him to tell them all he knew about me. He did, telling them about my job, my lifestyle and my connections to you. That was how they started coming hard on me.

‘First came the threatening letters, which I ignored believing they were just bluffing. My police friends were the ones who even encouraged me not to relent. They themselves did underestimate the tenacity and clout of the cult.

'The tentacles of the cult had even reached the police force. My friends realised that only when their boss who used to give them permission to dig into the cult was suddenly demoted and sent off to some remote place. The first order the new chief gave my friends was a severe warning to hands off the case of the cult. This chief subsequently burnt the files. My friends told me everything and to save themselves, took their distance away from me. I had suddenly become a bad omen for their careers.

Minna clapped her hands, and followed up with a sigh.

'When I started having these problems with women and my office, one of my police friends called and told me everything though he warned me to keep the call secret. You are the first person to hear this. You have to keep quiet about it.'

Minna quickly raised her hand as if making a solemn oath. 'Dimo, I am very sorry for getting you into this. If not of my reckless sister and me none of this would have happened. I am so sorry.' Minna wanted to cry but her heart was too full of fear to cry.

'You don't have to be,' said Dimo waving a hand in the air. 'You are not the one who got me involved in the first place. You don't have to blame yourself. Things happen the way they happen and it's not all the time we can predict what the result could be. I got in the show out of a desire for adventure even though I thought Dorothy would be free in the process.'

'What do you mean by desire for adventure?'

'I have a rabid hatred for secretive groups especially those that recruit their members by intimidation and blackmail. Those that enslave their members and hold society to ransom. This cult, I got to discover are like the Italian mafia. Domination, gathering all privileges for themselves and creating their own social order. They further exploit the weak and poor to build more fortresses around themselves with the intention that their secrets and privileges remain secure. I felt called by the challenge and the earlier discoveries further whetted my appetite. That was why I kept spending and digging.'

'So you are the patriot that your brother accused me of.'

'He accused you of what?' squealed Dimo.

'It's not very important,' said Minna, waving her brother-in-law off. 'If I knew things were going to take this dimension I wouldn't have got you involved in Dorothy's deals. See what has happened. Your nice job is hanging in the balance. Tetang has lost the opportunity of a lifetime. I have missed my holiday classes. There is no longer harmony in this house for your brother thinks I have sold the family to the devil.

'He is sometimes so myopic.'

Minna nodded. 'He accused me of sacrificing my own family for the sake of my sister's child and there is a lot of truth in that. My Akwen has started flirting with men because she has lost credibility in the advice I give her. She claims all I care about is Ngam and as a result, goes ahead to do things just to spite me. It's all coming apart Dimo and I am the cause.' Tears sprang out of Minna's eyes.

'You don't have to blame yourself, Minna. How many times do I have to tell you that? It is the price you are paying for being responsible. That is more than I can say about myself. Cheer up Minna. Things would work out, you will see.' Dimo offered Minna a paper napkin he had in his pocket. Minna blew her nose and mopped her eyes.

'And that is not all,' continued Minna. 'I have these people hovering around me with the intention of abducting Ngam and destroying my family.'

'They can't do anything Minna. I told you. I am however surprised that my brother has so far not warned them off. They are only trying to intimidate you. Now that I am here, I will do something about it. My brother has always been too cautious in life. Sometimes, you have to be ruthless. Wipe your tears Minna.'

Minna did and cleared her throat. 'This anyway is not about me. It is about you, Dimo. You have to do something about this bachelorhood of yours.'

Dimo nodded with a hint of regret on his face. 'I know women have tried to take advantage of my situation and I have been taking advantage of them too. That is why the bloody cult exploits this weakness of mine to intimidate me. Well, I'll be deeply disappointed

if I am sacked but that would not be the end of the world for me. What I won't tolerate are these opportunists wanting me to be the father of their children when I know I am not responsible.'

'But the pregnancies are true?'

Dimo nodded but quickly added with a stammer, 'but I am not responsible.'

'And you were actually involved with these women?' There was an emerging picture of disgust on Minna's face.

'Yes, but I can assure you I have been taking all the precautions. I am scared of AIDS. How could a child have passed?'

Minna took a deep breath indicating she was not very satisfied. 'Those things are not one hundred percent safe.'

'Mine were.'

They both burst out laughing though Minna's was mirthless.

'We shouldn't be laughing, Dimo. This is very serious. What I suppose your bosses would be concluding is that you are not responsible. You should prove to them that you can be responsible by accepting the pregnancies or at least getting married. This family needs more children for goodness sake.'

'Of course I wanted to do that but I needed tight evidence. I don't want what is happening to you in relation to Ngam to happen me.'

'What happened to Ngam?' asked Minna, astonished.

'You people had trouble identifying his parent and I am not sure you are yet one hundred percent sure. I know my brother isn't.'

This was stunning news to Minna. In spite of all the evidence there was, Tetang still did not believe Ngam was Dorothy's child? This was deliberate, Minna decided. 'I can swear on my mother's grave that Ngam is Dorothy's son.'

'You are right,' said Dimo tactfully. He realised he had made Minna uncomfortable by raising the topic. 'For me however, I asked the women to go for the most modern identification test in the Reference Hospital in Douala. I was going to foot the bills. But the women refused, giving flimsy excuses. That was sufficient evidence to me that the cult was indeed behind them.'

'The cult was more interested in raising the scandal that could cost me my job. I told this to the board but they told me to handle my private affairs and keep the bank out. The chairman concluded by giving me an ultimatum. Get married or get out. They don't want the scandals however false they were. I must therefore get married just to assure them?'

Minna smiled. 'But I don't think that is a bad idea. You yourself have confirmed that a bad private life can affect an establishment like yours. Why not just go ahead and change it. Get married.'

'But that is not the issue. The cult could always look for another scandal if they want to crush me. They may not have succeeded with the women but I know how creative they can be. I will get married but when the time is right.'

'And when is that time?' Tetang appeared on the veranda unannounced. 'When you are jobless?'

Dimo did not respond. Instead, he rose and threw his elder brother a contemptuous look.

'You are very insensitive,' said Minna to her husband, gathering the plates on the table.

'And you are not too clever.' Tetang waved a bunch of keys, which contained his car keys. He wore a mocking smile.

Minna sneered at him and turned her back on him. 'Before you go, remember Auntie Aggie would be leaving with Ngam very early tomorrow.'

Tetang grunted as Dimo walked past him into the house.

‘Remove your car,’ Tetang shouted at his brother who was just disappearing into the house. Dimo’s car was blocking the way into the garage. Tetang walked into the garage but Dimo kept going as if he had not heard. Tetang decided to remove the car himself. But as he was about to enter the car the bell at the gate rang. It was followed immediately by a loud, anguished voice. Tetang and Minna recognised the voice and both of them rushed towards the gate. Tetang got there first. He threw open the gates amidst fierce protests by Sister Samba from the other side.

Sister Samba did not wait for any greeting as she pushed Tetang aside and heaved herself into the compound. Minna had never seen her friend looking so uptight and haggard before. The woman wore no hair attachments like she always did, leaving a shocking display of her balding head. It was a long time Minna had seen her friend’s head like that and it frightened her. Sister Samba wore simple bathing slippers and her feet were encrusted with mud.

Sister Samba stopped only when she stood in front of Minna. She held her waist and folded herself over to ease the palpitations on her chest. Minna held her friend on the shoulder with concern. ‘Dis one weh you come like this! Enter for house, now.’

‘No, my sister,’ said Sister Samba, gasping for air. She waved a hand vigorously, her head still bowed. Come immediately and take your child.’

Minna shivered. ‘Akwen?’ Minna held her chest.

‘No,’ Sister Samba shook her head. ‘Is Akwen a child? Just come, I beg. Luckily, Tetang is here. We can go in his car.’

‘What is it now, sister?’ said Minna with some irritation and yet fear. ‘What child?’

‘No, my sister. My mouth cannot say it. You just come and see it. Get the car, Tetang,’ Sister Samba said with a commanding voice.

‘Let me call my brother to come and remove his car first.’ Tetang realised the key of his brother’s car was not with him.

‘Which brother? Dimo? That irresponsible fellow? Do you people have drama in your hands!’ Sister Samba clapped her hands laughing. ‘Noooo! It is your drama. Not mine. I am not going to get involved. It is too complicated for me.’

‘What is too complicated for you now, sister? You are talking to me as if you are talking to a stranger? What is it, Sister Samba?’

Dimo emerged from the house and was taken aback by a ferocious attack from Sister Samba.

‘You are the Dimo?’ cried Sister Samba, rushing towards Dimo. ‘You are the one who has brought all the trouble on this innocent family. Minna and her husband would not have been having all this wahala if you had exercised some bit of self-control. Touch-and-pass massa.’

Minna threw a hand across her mouth and was especially horrified when she saw all her children standing on the veranda. Had they understood what Sister Samba was referring to? ‘Go back into the house,’ she shouted at them. But her voice was drowned out by Sister Samba’s unrelenting anger.

‘You are a useless man. Get married and you wouldn’t. You only know how to touch-and-pass. Touch-and-pass now has destroyed not only those you touched but also your own family. Shame on you.’

‘But what have I done?’ Dimo said going closer to his accuser. ‘And who are you by the way?’

‘You don’t know me?’ Sister Samba slapped her chest and shook her head with regret. ‘I know all about you. Right to very intimate details.’

Minna’s eyes popped wider, frightened for the first time she might not know her friend

as well as she had thought. The horror of the thought! 'You and Dimo, sister?'

'What?' cried Sister Samba confused.

Minna wanted to say something but the breath was cut out of her by the realisation that her question had not been rational. She ended up saying something inaudible.

'What?' Sister Samba this time threw a hand behind her ear. Then she snorted in contempt when she understood. 'That would be the last thing I'll do even if that was the only criteria of going to heaven. This man here needs deliverance. Let's go and if you people don't follow me immediately, I'll call the police.'

'Since when did we become enemies Sister Samba?' Minna quizzed. She shouted at the children again and this time, they obeyed.

'I am still your best friend Minna and will be that forever. I am like this because I am sorry for you my sister. They put you in hell when you should be in heaven. All of these things that have been happening Minna, none of them is your fault. Some of the things you don't even know about. The one I thought I could solve and was actually succeeding, all of a sudden became so complicated that I had no choice but to raise my hands in surrender. I am sorry Minna but that is it.'

'Calm down Sister,' begged Minna holding her friend. 'I know you are the only person who knows how to be in control even in the tightest jam. Take that control now sister and talk to me calmly. Let's go in.'

'No Minna,' blurted Sister Samba. 'This one is too big for me to keep control. I am confused. If you people don't come immediately, something bad might happen to me. Minna. just come along with your husbands. They have to deal with it. Not you. At least, not you alone. Tell them to come with the car, now!' Sister Samba frowned, whipping her hands in the air.

Tetang looked at his brother. Both men were not sure what to expect. But they knew they could not ignore Sister Samba forever.

'Okay, let's go in my car,' Dimo offered. His car was closer to the gate.

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They all went in the car with the two men at the front. Nobody spoke to the other until they got to Sister Samba's place. She was the first person to kick her way out of the car, ordering the rest to follow her. She went round the bar and into her house. Minna strolled behind still wondering why her friend had become this hysterical. .

The house did not look any different, as Minna had known it: an old but modest set of upholstered chairs, a round dining table with three chairs and a dusty mahogany cupboard that looked more like a wardrobe. What however was new about the place was a mat spread by the cupboard on which a little boy, no bigger than Ngam rolled himself up and down.

'Your grandchild?' Minna asked, blowing a strained smile at the child.

'I wished it were. My daughters are not that fertile.' Sister Samba organised the chairs for her guests to seat down. She leaned on the chair where Minna was about to lower herself, throwing her hands on her waist. 'Minna, what happened to you has just happened to me and actually it was meant for you.'

Minna turned sharply and looked at her friend. 'What exactly do you mean?'

'Ma sister oh! Maybe we are living the end-times. Things that are happening these days are not just of this world.' Sister Samba clapped her hands and disappeared into a room. Minna did not know what to make of this. She had however seen enough drama to last her a lifetime. The one fact she was however certain about was that her friend was under some heavy dose of stress.

Everybody sat as Sister Samba came out of the room, carrying an envelop and her hair now wrapped in a scarf. She slapped the envelop on her free hand as she sashayed into the parlour. Without uttering a word but studying the faces of her guests, she dragged a chair from the dining table and sat some distance away from them. She sat forward, breathing deeply. 'I am going to start from the beginning,' she bleated, wiping her face.

‘Always the best starting point,’ said Tetang, feigning indifference.

Sister Samba ignored him. ‘Earlier this morning, a woman entered my bar looking all stressed up and tired. In her arms was a baby. I had sent Berri out and was alone behind the counter. She sat all by herself in one corner and buried her head over the table with the child lying on her laps. She looked thin and wretched. Not the type that would enter a bar just to buy a drink. I kept watching, but she sat still, not attempting to order.’ Sister Samba raised her chest to relieve a cramp before proceeding.

‘After some twenty minutes, I went to her and asked whether she wanted to order. She raised her face only briefly and shook her head. I didn’t recognise the face. It was dry and wrinkled. She looked older than I am. She seemed to be lost in thoughts. I felt pity for her. She looked like a woman who had just been kicked out of her miserable house by one of those kinds of poor husbands who don’t bring anything home but want to be fed like kings.’

‘Seems it’s men bashing show,’ said Tetang cynically.

Don’t conclude so soon,’ said Sister Samba. ‘Just listen. The way this girl fussed over the child, I thought she was wondering how she was going to feed him now that she had been thrown out. I offered her a drink all the same, on me. A soft drink. She was so grateful that I thought she was going to fall on her knees to thank me. From that, I knew she was helpless but nice. She didn’t look like anybody I had known before. I was just being a Good Samaritan.’ Sister Samba paused to catch her breath.

Minna looked straight into her friend’s taut face, urging her with a hand to take her time.

‘I went back behind the counter and kept watching her. She drank and gave some to the child. Seeing the way the baby was crying, I thought he was hungry. I went into the house and brought some bread for her to give him. I didn’t realise she was even hungrier than her child. She ate more than half of the bread, giving just a little to the child. I asked if she wanted more but she just shook her head. Pride, I thought.

‘When she had finished feeding the child, she pulled out a pen and paper from her bag and began to write. She didn’t look to me like some educated scholar but the way she concentrated and wrote non-stop for about thirty minutes made it appear she was writing some critical thesis. After, she folded the paper and stuffed it in an envelop still from her bag. With the envelop in one hand, her bag over her shoulder and the baby in the other hand, she came over to the counter.

‘I thought she wanted to hand the letter to me. But she didn’t. She instead slotted it in her bag. Then she spoke in such a soft tone that I thought she would collapse the next moment. “Mami, sorry for bothering you. Show me some place to leave this child so I could go to the toilet.” I was in a mind to help her. Sympathetic, I took the child from her. The child gave me the extra charm which was the sweet smile of an angel. He was handsome and I began to imagine the kind of man who had made this one and could find the heart to drive him away too.

‘Foolish me, I unrolled a mat behind the counter and placed the child on it myself. She dropped her handbag by the child and asked me to show her my toilet. I took her to the pit toilet behind and came back to serve my other customers. I almost forgot about her and the child as customers kept ordering. The child was also calm. He just lay down, talking to himself.

‘It was when the child made a sudden cry that I realised it was over thirty minutes since the mother left for the toilet. My heart started throbbing. I thought that, hey, let it not be that the woman had died. The way she had looked was no different from a cadaver. A living corpse.

‘I went to the toilet and was shocked when I saw the two doors wide ajar with nobody inside. I went and peered inside afraid the slab might have collapsed when the woman was on it. Stupid me, I asked if somebody was down there whereas the concrete slab was in tact and the holes on it were just big enough to allow only my hand to pass.



I just knew I had let myself in for some satanic game. I went round the toilet, searched in the bush, asked people around but the woman was nowhere to be found. Under a small patch of grass by the toilet, I discovered a bundle. It was the very kaba that the woman had been wearing. Inside, was a wig.

'Tell me wonders!' cried Minna breaking the monotony of Sister Samba's voice for the first time. 'I now understand what you meant when you talked about something happening to you as it did to me. They dumped a child on you. The woman had disguised. Real premeditation.'

'I swear, my sister,' agreed Sister Samba. 'I am sure she wanted to chuck the things into the pit but she heard footsteps and dumped them in the bush, then fled. That was how I was lumped with a baby. Just like that. When I came back into the bar, I wanted to raise the alarm but some very important customers had just entered. Six big people. Such customers you have to handle with care and Berri had not yet come back. I could not abandon them to take care of the child. This bar is my life and that of my children.'

'You kept the child behind the counter?' asked Minna.

'What else could I have done? I was on my toes and only had to be rushing out every minute to check on him. Two hours, Berri was not back and the men left only under just thirty minutes ago. I have given that girl notice to pack out. I am getting a new girl and why not even a boy.'

Minna wanted to say I told you so but realised it would have been insensitive of her.

'You were talking about a child,' said Tetang with some annoyance. He was already bored.

'That's why we are here,' said Sister Samba earnestly.

'You dragged us all this way just just to stun us with your drama?' Tetang's patience had snapped.

Sister Samba twisted her face. 'Minna, tell this husband of yours that I am not the one who cancelled his contract. He should direct his anger to the proper place.'

'You should not say things that do not concern you,' fired Tetang

'Brother please,' entered Dimo for the first time. 'Could you allow the lady land?'

'Please, land if at all you are an aeroplane.'

'What has come over you, Mr Fru Tetang,' roared Sister Samba. 'I used to think you were the gentleman of gentlemen. I am disappointed. I truly am.'

'So be it,' said Tetang rising from the chair. 'Since when did you become my mother? Go and give me a drink and stop all this nonsense. I am sick of all this child business.'

'Tee, why can't you be a bit patient?' Minna also rose on her husband. 'Sister cannot call us like this for nothing. Sister, go ahead and forget about him.' Minna was really fed up with her husband's strange attitude. It was a clear case of transferred aggression.

'Well, before you go Mr Fru, let me tell you that that child you people call Ngam was brought to your house because of you.'

Tetang turned sharply around from the door. He took some steps back towards Sister Samba. 'And what do you mean by that?'

'If you sit and stay quiet I would explain.'

Tetang looked around and scratched his head. The suspicion had gone this far? He threw a quick glance at Minna and sat down with a guilt-ridden face. 'Go ahead?' he said weakly.

Minna moved to the edge of her seat. 'What did you say about Ngam, Sister?'

'Remember the woman you people nearly knocked down when you were going to the nightclub?' asked Sister Samba.

'That was Dorothy?' said Minna eagerly.

'No. That was Bridget.'

'What?' Minna and Tetang cried in unison. Some current began to flow up and down Minna's body.

'Yes,' Sister Samba shook her head with confidence. 'The very Bridget you and I know. And yes, she left the child on the veranda.'

Minna threw both hands over her mouth. 'No Sister. I think this is a joke too far. Ngam is my sister's child unless you want to tell me my sister handed the child to Bridget. The blood of my sister flows in that child.'

'Minna, I wish that were the case. I did strongly believe that myself until I pushed Bridget and she finally revealed everything to me.'

Minna jumped up from her seat. Tetang carried his face in his hands.

Sister Samba smiled a cheerless one. 'That too was my reaction when Bridget herself said it. I asked her to prove it.'

'Which Bridget are you talking about?' Dimo broke in. He had all along been a silent, almost detached spectator.

Sister Samba made a cynical snort. 'The one you know.' She spoke with firmness as if she had been expecting the question.

All eyes fell on Dimo. Silence filled the parlour. Even the baby was quiet though wide-awake.

'What do you mean by that?' said Dimo, rather scared.

'I am the one to tell you what you already know?' said Sister Samba, eyes focussed on Dimo. 'Some two years ago, Bridget became pregnant. Dimo, I am sure you can tell us what happened after that.'

Dimo shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He bowed his face to avoid the eyes of his brother and wife. 'The only Bridget I know is the one I met by chance in Douala.'

'That is the one,' said Sister Samba sharply.

'What is going on here,' quizzed Minna, dying with tension. 'Dimo?' she looked at her brother-in-law.

Dimo cleared his throat. 'She came and told me she was carrying my baby.'

'Bridget?' erupted Tetang, 'You were going out with Bridget?'

'It was just a brief fling. She came onto me. She practically forced herself on me.'

'You are too handsome for women not to force themselves on you.' That was Sister Samba. 'And did she have you! So much that she wanted to marry you.'

'She did?' said Tetang, mouth agape.

Dimo nodded and bowed his head. 'Like the other women, she wanted to marry me for the reason that she was carrying my child. She refused to have it aborted and kept pestering me to marry her.'

'And why didn't you?' asked Minna, sympathising with Bridget and despising her brother-in-law for the first time ever. 'You are the kind of men who use women and when things happen, you take flight and dump them.'

'It was not like that,' said Dimo with a pleading voice. He did not cherish being hated by Minna.

'It is always the woman's fault,' went Sister Samba. 'When will you men realise that when something goes inside, something comes out and that what conscientious men do is accept their responsibility.'

Dimo threw his hands in despair. 'Would you Sister Samba have advised me to get married to a woman who everybody knows is a free woman?'

Sister Samba had a ready answer. 'Would you sleep with a woman who everybody knows is a free woman?'

Dimo wanted to speak but ended up biting his lips.

'Of course you can't answer that. You know very well that you are wrong.'

Dimo eyed Sister Samba with sudden hostility. 'If all this is a plan to castigate men, then I think I have had enough.' Dimo rose, looking at his brother and hoping to get some show of male solidarity.

Tetang shook his head with vigour. 'No Dimo. Sit down. You have some questions to answer. Why is it that you went out with Bridget and I am the one being accused of going out with her?'

I have the answer to that,' said Sister Samba, shutting Dimo up before he could curse

his brother. 'But before I give that answer, let me first tell our man who wants to go that his woman actually gave birth to a bouncing baby boy who is alive and kicking and he should be prepared to take the child. He should do it quickly for Bridget is about to hand him over to Njotu.'

'That would not happen in Jesus' name,' erupted Minna, snapping her fingers. 'A child of our family would not go to Njotu.'

'But how do you know it is not Njotu's?' asked Dimo with some effrontery and standing by the door.

'Njotu was certified medically barren since his first wife had their last child. Bridget herself told me. She had found out from his doctor without him knowing. That is why she is still hesitant about legalising the marriage with him. She wanted a fertile man like you and she has the right to choose like every other woman, doesn't she, Dimo?'

'And I choose not to be exploited.'

'By who? By your own child?' Sister Samba chose her words so well that Dimo did not know what to say.

'Wonders shall never end,' said Minna tapping her foot on the ground.

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Minna sat back in her chair looking miserable. In her head however was a raging mill. 'Sister, what I have gathered from this is that my Ngam is a product of Bridget and Dimo.' Minna wiped her face.

Sister Samba nodded with total solemnity.

Minna squeezed her hands and bowed her head. She felt as if her life had been taken away from her and in its place were the lives of several mad people. Earlier, she had felt she was strong enough to accommodate any startling revelations that were going to come from her friend. But now she was not so sure. How was she going to accept the fact that Ngam was not the child she thought he was? Not her sister's child? Not her own her own blood and after all she had gone through? Minna raised her head. 'Sister tell me. Why did Bridget bring the child to us in such a vile manner?'

'Minna my sister,' said Sister Samba throwing her hands in the air. 'Bridget may be presenting the front of an adult but she is in fact a child and a very bad child. Bridget went and had the child in their village with her mother and came and lied to Njotu that the child had died. Bridget hid the child with a friend still in their village when she heard Mrs Abbe had been asking about the child all the way from Yaounde. When she heard Mrs Abbe was coming she decided she was going to hand the child to his father before the woman could arrive.'

'This puzzles me,' Minna entered. 'I thought that she would gladly hand the child to Njotu who I presume would have liked the idea considering that his wife had fled with all his children, and not to a man who was not interested either in her or the child.'

'Good thinking Minna and the very one I exposed to Bridget. But you see, she was not totally devoted to Njotu. She still had hopes that with the child, Dimo might still think of her. Not being sure of her reception if she went to Douala, she decided to hand the child to Tetang, hoping that as Dimo's older brother, Tetang would put pressure on Dimo to accept the child and probably marry the mother of the child.'

'But she dumped the child on the floor without any message,' said Minna angrily. 'She didn't hand the child.'

'Before Bridget carried the child to your home, she had actually decided she was going to do it clean, explain the situation honestly and hand over the child with the excuse that she could not cope on her own. When she got to your gate, she lost her nerve. She stood by the gate wondering what to do when you people came out of the gate on your way to the club. She was trying to run away when the car nearly knocked her down.'

'She didn't know how to cross the road properly?' said Tetang with a sullen frown.

'She was very nervous and was afraid you people might identify her,' replied Sister

Samba. 'After you people left, she came back and saw the gate open. That was when the wild idea came to her. She entered and saw your children reading on the table. She dropped the child on the veranda and waited by the gate. She started by mimicking the cry of a baby and the proper baby took over. She left only after your children had taken the baby inside. That was when she was sure the baby would be safe.'

'And she went to the nightclub with no qualms,' said Minna. Her friend was trying to make Bridget look more human than she was.

'As I told you, she is a woman who likes to enjoy herself no matter what.'

Minna clapped her hands three times. 'Therefore Ngam remains our child.' Minna had already resigned herself to the fact that she was going to assume responsibility for her brother-in-law's child until Dimo was stably married to take the child. That was her duty. She was the only daughter-in-law of the Fru's family so far and her mother-in-law was way too old to take care of a child.

'That depends,' said Sister Samba, eyeing Minna with pity.

'On?' quipped Minna

'The father.'

Dimo lifted his back from the chair then dropped it back. He said nothing.

'Thank you very much sister. I think we should go now and talk things in the family.' Minna rose. The sun was still very hot and bright outside.

'Not now Minna,' said Sister Samba rising from her seat. She went and opened more of the louvres of the window. 'We did not finish the conversation about this baby.' The child was on his knees on the mattress, trying to stand up.

Minna was disappointed but somehow felt a certain relief. The story about her husband and Bridget was therefore no story at all. She was sad losing a nephew and the only souvenir she had about her sister. But it also felt like a burden had been lifted off her shoulders. She no longer had a baby to steal her attention away from her children and husband. She no longer had any worries about kidnapping, civil status papers or the cult.

Even if she were going to bring up her brother-in-law's child, it was her husband and his brother who were going to bear the bulk of the worries. That was selfish but liberating.

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Sister Samba rose from her seat and went towards Minna. 'I would like you to read this letter first. Privately, if you like but I am sure after reading the letter, you would not be able to stop others from reading. I removed it from the bag of the woman who dashed me her baby.' She handed the letter to Minna.

Minna held the letter with uncertainty. The envelop was not sealed. She plucked out a dirty A4 paper and began to read.

*Dear Sister,*

'It's Dorothy,' said Minna, trembling and almost throwing the paper away.

*I miss you badly and when I arrived this morning, I could not wait to get out of the bus. I was desperate to see you, your husband and the children, but as I got closer to the house in a taxi, something snapped in me and I could not continue. I had to go back and disguise and instead of coming to your house, I stopped at Sister Samba's. I could recognise her from the distance but fortunately and unfortunately for me, she could not recognise me.*

*Fortunately because she would have scuppered my plans had she recognised me. Unfortunately, because had she recognised me, she would have forced me to see you. But it was not to be. I just could not face you after all that I had done to myself and to you.*

*You did not leave any stone unturned to make a woman of me. Not even when I deliberately left the stone in my own path. I spat in your face and spurned all your efforts. And what were you going to gain by sacrificing for me? Nothing. You were doing it all for my own good. I was blind*

*sister. Blinded by my stupidity and wickedness. Yes, I know I was all these things and I am not making any excuses for myself. I knew what I was doing and can remember every bad deed.*

*What however I did not know and could not forecast was the price I was going to pay for my misdeeds. I had fallen in the hands of many bad men before and should have known when one presented himself in front of me. It seemed however that I was addicted to bad men. The rougher they came, the more addicted I became.*

*The latest one I got into was a real classical operator. The ultimate of bad men. He was smooth and dashing until I could have sworn he was sent down from heaven. He was indeed but actually, he was being expelled. He was Lucifer in person.*

*He got me wrapped well and before I knew it, I was on my knees everyday, singing his praises and exalting this god that has nothing to do with the one you people know. Not only did he make me pregnant, he also dragged me into his shrine to serve him not only with my body but also with my soul while surrendering myself to his god. Little by little, ever so deliberately, he pushed me lower and lower and I sank down a pool until I was completely drowned.*

*It is only there at the bottom of that pool that I now live. It is only the water of the pool that I breathe, drink and eat to live now sister. In short, sister, I am not the normal Dorothy that anyone in the normal world knew. Not even you would recognise me. My face yes but it is only a mask and beyond it, I am a bloodsucker. Mankind's worst nightmare.*

*You can tell from my language that I am not the same Dorothy. Was my English this rich? Somebody who could not be patient to take her A levels and pretended to be a student nurse? The good language however should not fool you. It was an investment, not for good, but for evil. Wolf in sheep clothing, if you get my drift.*

*I am a cultist sister. I used to call them that myself. I operate more in the spiritual than in the physical and the results are not palatable for your world. I have killed and maimed and I don't feel an iota of guilt. They did something to my mind after my man got me in. I don't know exactly what they did but all I know is that I became very educated and polished, meeting big men and women and calling them by their first names. You would not believe the number of ministers and tycoons I chat with on a regular basis. I am actually their Deaconess and they respect me. I have converted many of them into my man's cause.*

*Often, I meet people who used to know me but I could not recognise them anymore. They cut off a big chunk of my worldly side and buried it for good. I actually cannot remember much. That is one of the reason I fear to meet you. However, you and your family, I remember very well but we would not be able to interact properly. I also remember Ma and Pa probably because I carry their blood. Nevertheless, the rest I cannot remember. I try to but to no avail.*

*My people protect their own and can be very vicious if you try to penetrate them from the wrong end. I heard you and another man were trying to trace me. That was a very dangerous thing you did. We are connected to all the power hubs of this country and anybody who dares us could be destroyed. You are aware of what happened to the man and to your husband. I am sorry your husband had to be dealt that blow but I could not help it.*

*Sis, I want you to stay happy with your family and forget about me. I am no longer what you knew and I would like everyone to remember me the way they last saw me. Not now in my current situation. I am very happy where I am and this is my life until I die. The only souvenir of me I have for you is my child. His father is the man who got me trapped here. The child was such a nuisance that I was given the permission to come and hand him over to you. They would have killed him if I did not plead. Please take the child that I have left with your friend. He is mine.*

Bye

Dorothy.

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Minna slowly rose from her chair, held her chest and walked out of the door, the letter in her hand. Sister Samba followed. Minna's hands went on her waist as she closed her eyes

and consciously forced herself to make deep breaths like an athlete about to make a sprint. Sister Samba held her and tapped her on the back.

'Easy Min, but you have to take it like a woman.' Sister Samba led her back into the house and towards the child. She picked up the child and handed him to Minna.

Minna at first hesitated but eventually took the child. After studying his face for a while, she pressed him over her shoulders and began to cry. The two brothers' left their seats and went towards her. Tetang held her. 'What's the matter, Min?'

Minna handed the letter to him. Tetang began to read. He went back to his chair as the pressure from the letter built in him. Everyone stayed put, saying nothing. Minna's sobs and the rustling of paper were the only sound in the house.

'What is going on?' cried Dimo feeling like a fool. He seized the letter from his brother and read.

Sister Samba was about to say something when Berri burst into the house. 'Mrs Abbe says they want to go.'

'Tell them to hold on a minute, I am coming.'

There was this sudden look of fear on Sister Samba's face, which Minna noticed. But Minna was too inundated with emotions to figure out what was going on. She however had the feeling that her friend was up to some plot.

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Berri went. Sister Samba left Minna and stood by the door. The air in the house had become too stuffy for her liking. 'Minna asked something about the fate of Ngam; the child that is Bridget's. I think it will be best to hear the answer from the mother's mouth.' There was fear in her voice.

'That's why you arranged for them to be here this evening?' said Minna not too mildly.

'I am not going to have anything to do with that cheap girl,' uttered Tetang with spite and interrupting Sister Samba from responding to Minna's question. Sister Samba had already begun to bite her lips.

'But we have no choice. She is the only one who can confirm who the father of the child is and explain why she had to dump her child on you. What if it is indeed true (which I believe is the case) that you are the uncle to her child? There's no way you would be able avoid her unless of course you people don't want the child.' Sister Samba moved closer to Tetang.

'Four is enough for me,' said Tetang.

'Yes, we want the child,' entered Minna forcefully. Not only was her husband sounding selfish, he was being outright childish.

'Why don't we all join them.' Sister Samba raised pleading hands in the air.

'It would be better that we talk here, not in the bar,' said Dimo lamely. 'That would be more private. This letter has cleared my doubts. I hope we are going to talk like mature people and settle things. Every matter put in its proper place. Sister Samba, please call them.'

Sister Samba twisted her face in surprise. Surprised at Dimo's calm maturity. 'You think it will be best if we talked here?'

Dimo nodded with firmness. He looked like one who had already made up his mind to accept his fate. His brother's face in contrast carried some vague neutrality. Minna's focused on the child while she tried to digest what her sister had written. "Forget about me." The apocalyptic words sank into her bloodstream with anaesthetizing effect.

Dimo took the child from Minna and placed him over his shoulders. He rocked the child then broke into some brief delirious laughter. Everyone stared at him in surprise and kept staring as he paced up and down the parlour with the child in his arms.

'Practising fatherhood with the wrong child?' said Tetang, grimly.

Dimo ignored him and Minna was glad for that.

Minna held her face in cupped hands and closed her eyes. She felt like singing. She

wanted to sing a song that could help soothe her spirits. But she could not think of any. Her mind was torn between sympathising with and hating her sister. God should have sent her but to a different family where people were ordinary and did not make trouble for each other. Minna felt exhausted and wanted to go home. But she had to stay and solve problems that had been created by other people. She was not a trouble giver. Had never been.



Carrying three chairs, Berri led a file that included Mrs Abbe, Bridget and Njotu. The trio stood by the door and on their faces one could read fear and shock or something even worse. They could not believe what they were seeing. Minna also jumped to her feet without any conscious thought before sitting down. Dimo's eyes were almost popping out of their sockets as he looked at Bridget.

Tetang was the only person who seemed to have maintained command of his voice. 'The three angels of hell,' said he as the last person on the file, Njotu, pushed himself away from his women.

'And the three child-traffickers,' Njotu responded immediately.

Sister Samba jumped in before anyone else could speak again. She had already noticed the frown that had formed on Bridget's face and knew Bridget had one of the most poisonous of tongues. 'Mr Fru, please. These people have come here just out of courtesy to me. If they knew you people were here, they would have come but with the police and the outcome would not have been comfortable, I can assure you. There is nobody in this parlour that is sin-free, is there?

'And I should tremble at that?' Tetang could not hold his rage.

Sister Samba gritted her teeth in regret. Wrong tactics. 'I am sorry for not choosing the right words. I am as tense as everyone here in this house. And one thing I know about tension is that it poisons the reflexes and can even send you mad. That is what mine is doing to me and I am sure to everyone of us here.

Dimo and Minna nodded. Tetang bowed his head in silent acquiescence though still breathing in defiance.

'Please let us all sit down and send mister tension out of the door.' This little plea from Sister Samba seemed to ease the atmosphere a bit as the new comers took their seats. The sitting arrangement was carefully done by Sister Samba. Bridget sat between Mrs Abbe and Njotu and the three of them facing the Fru family.

Sister Samba still sat by the dining table in order to have a good view of all the faces. The real Ngam was spluttering away in the cradle of Dimo's arms. Dimo was rocking him more out of a need to calm himself than a genuine desire to pacify a child.

Mild sun beams had begun to slash their way through windows. Sister Samba waited when Berri had gone before rising. She invoked a prayer and after harping on some introductory platitudes about peace and reconciliation, she formerly introduced everyone seated.

'I thank everyone for responding to my invitation even though it was done very crudely,' Sister Samba went on. 'My initial intention had not been to have this face-to-face meeting. My intention had been telling Minna about Bridget's revelations, getting rid of Dorothy's child and allowing the Fru family to lick their wounds by themselves. Then I was going to tell Mrs Abbe and brother that their problems were above me and they should go ahead and do what they thought fit.

'I just couldn't see how I was going to solve this child problem that had taken a whole new dimension when this other child came on the scene. No, I thought it was too big for me. There is no war as intractable as that between two families. I have seen it before and I knew one was about to explode in my face. My natural instinct was self-preservation and that meant keeping myself out. Not letting myself become the pawn, as it were.'

Sister Samba's eyes were on Minna. 'But I have a friend who would never forgive me if she discovered I did nothing to help her in her most agonising moment. That I played Pontius Pilate in a situation where I could have been a more positive actor. I knew she would understand my position if I tried but didn't succeed but doing nothing would have been inexcusable.'

Sister Samba now focused on Mrs Abbe. 'Also, I had let people give me their confidence to the point where I was told very private stories and promised not tell the next person. How could I in all my conscience let such people crash when I know very well that they were depending on my good counsel to forge ahead.

'That was how the idea came to me just as I was about to ask Minna and her husbands to carry this child away. I thought what if these two families were to meet face-to-face, maybe some sense might prevail and that in the end we might all go away if not with satisfaction, at least with understanding. That is why I would like to plead with all of us to be patient and open-minded to find answers to the various questions in our minds.

There was respectful silence in the parlour with everyone giving Sister Samba the benefit of doubt. They all seemed to agree that she had spoken with the right voice of neutrality and concern for both sides.

Sister Samba was still on her feet. 'I met Mrs Abbe not very long ago but I can tell every intimate story about her and her family. Am I lying Mrs Abbe?'

'No lying,' Mrs Abbe shook her head.

'If I call you my richest customer, it is not because of the money you spend but rather that you are rich in honesty. The first day you came here, directed by one of Mrs Fru's colleagues...'

'Who's that?' interrupted Minna in exasperation. 'Lisha? I just knew. That cheap girl.'

'No Minna,' entered Sister Samba resolutely. 'It was all in a good cause, I can assure you. Lisha meant no harm nor did Mrs Abbe. Mrs Abbe came to me like a woman in desperation to another woman. In fact, her journey here to Bamenda was in search of the very peace, which thousands of women the world over are constantly in search of. Peace in the family. Isn't that right Madam Abbe?'

Mrs Abbe nodded again this time with a grin.

'You are the one who came to me. I never knew you before and had never heard your story before.'

Mrs Abbe nodded.

'You told me all about yourself and your problem and I promised that I would help you the best way I could. If I didn't think you were honest, I would have ignored you. You told me you had no child and that your husband got another wife as a consequence. You also said your father was dying and needed a grandson to make his successor. Reason why I asked you about giving the chair to Albert's son with his ex-wife. You revealed that nobody knew where the wife had taken the children to. Not even Albert. Your only hope you said was the news that Albert's girlfriend or fiancée had given birth to a boy.'

There was this strained smile on Mrs Abbe's face. 'I was very happy when Albert phoned. My fazzer will give chair to his sister's son if we don't give him grandson quick. So I come to Bamenda to take Albert's son to show our fazzer, only not to see *bébé*. Bridget say *bébé* died. I press hard and talk to Bridget woman to woman but she insist child died. I ask to see child grave but Bridget gets angry and say iz not my business. My brozza iz not strong enough to make Bridget tell truth. I am frustrate.'

'Did you explain to Bridget why you wanted the child so badly?' asked Sister Samba eyeing Bridget. Bridget's eyes were cast on the floor.

'Yes I do many times but Bridget keep saying iz not my business. Ze one tsing I sure about however is zat ze *bébé* is alive though Bridget would not say where *bébé* is. But since I frustrate, I want to go back then in a bar I hear a teacher in Technical High School just find *bébé* in her house like zat. I go to school. I meet Mademoiselle Lisha who show me Madam Fru. But Madame Fru say iz her *bébé* zen Lisha show me you, Sister Samba zat you are best friend wiz Madame Fru. Zat iz why I come to you to help.'

'But what made you think the child with Madame Fru could be Bridget's child?' enquired Sister Samba.

'What Mademoiselle Lisha told me, I suspect zis was ze case. I told my brozza about what I suspect. He wants *bébé* but say he is not strong to force Bridget. I confront Bridget

myself and ze way she respond make me suspect more. I could see fear on her face.'

Bridget had bowed her head and made as if she was not listening.

'But Bridget refused?' said Sister Samba.

Mrs Abbe nodded. 'But I know she not tell all the truth. Zat iz why I stay more in Bamenda determined to see end of ze matter.'

Bridget was still not prepared to lift her face. She had even begun to fiddle with her fingers.

'Did you finally get the truth?'

Mrs Abbe shook her head. 'I go to ze police but zey can't help me. But I get one police friend who iz prepared to investigate ze matter private and he brings to me information zat convince me Mrs Fru has my brozza's son. I have been preparing to see prosecutor.'

'What did the policeman say to convince you,' probed Sister Samba.

'He talked to Bridget much connecting ze *bébé* with Madame Fru. Bridget reaction make him conclude what I just said.'

'You and your brother connived to naked me in front of a policeman,' erupted Bridget angrily, casting biting eyes at Mr Njotu.

'No idea,' cried Njotu raising his hands in the air with real surprise on his face. 'My sister told me nothing.'

'I do it alone,' said Mrs Abbe. 'Yes we need ze *bébé* as successor but more important, my brozza needs ze *bébé* for hiz peace of mind. He iz sick because of ze children his last wife run away wiz. I sorry for my brozza too much. Zat is why I look for zis *bébé* in desperation.'

'Did you believe your police friend and the prosecutor were going to succeed?'

Mrs Abbe hesitated for the first time since she started speaking. She looked at Minna then at Sister Samba. 'I was just trying. Play the last card as zey say. Intimidate the Fru family to come clean, I sorry to say. When ze prosecutor speak to me before going to court, I know we cannot win. Zat is why I give up. Tsenks to your good advice too, I abandon case. It would have created too much fighting.'

Minna wanted to sympathise with this childless woman but despised her for thinking of intimidation. Intimidate her? What temerity! 'But you've finally got your child,' said Minna matter-of-factly

'No,' squealed Mrs Abbe with an air of dejection. 'I go back tomorrow and I wash my hands. *Bébé* or no *bébé*, people still live.'

'Yes Mrs Abbe, you've finally got the child. Bridget's child.' That was Sister Samba, with a smile.

'I don't understand.'

'Ngam, I mean the child with Mrs Fru is Bridget's child afterall.' Sister Samba spoke calmly

Mrs Abbe slapped a hand over her mouth before leaping off her chair and falling on Sister Samba. 'Tell me zis is true Sister Samba?' She did not wait for a response before falling on Bridget and then on Minna.

Minna wanted to be happy but tempered her reaction when she remembered the child was Dimo's not Njotu's.

Mrs Abbe was grooving. She embraced everybody in the room, ending with her brother with whom she started dancing. 'I say it,' she bleated. 'God has done for me again. I knew it.'

Nobody else was dancing with Mrs Abbe. Not even Albert who stood stiff while his sister pranced about holding all parts of his body. Nobody was even smiling. They all watched quietly at the woman as if politely conceding the moment was hers.

'Perhaps we should not start celebrating,' went a nervous plea from Sister Samba.

'Why not,' screamed Mrs Abbe, undaunted.

'The child, I am sorry to say is not your brother's child.'

Mrs Abbe's froze on the spot by her brother, her hands shrinking to her sides. The look she gave Sister Samba could spark a fire. 'What do you mean?' she stuttered.

‘Sit down please,’ begged Sister Samba.

Reluctantly, Mrs Abbe dropped on her seat, holding her chest. Everyone looked at her with pity. That included her brother who had bowed his head.

‘The child isn’t mine?’ Mr Njotu said to Minna, his voice barely audible.

Sister Samba cut in as Bridget began to fiddle with the hem of her surprisingly modest frock. ‘Sorry Mr Njotu but that is the truth.’

Bridget did not raise her face and that confirmed it for both Njotu and Mrs Abbe. ‘I am sorry,’ Bridget muted.

Silence enveloped the house with the only noise coming from the bar. Dimo, who still had the baby in his arms, rose suddenly. People did not take notice until they heard his voice. ‘I am the father of the child.’

‘No you are not,’ cried Bridget jumping to her feet as if she had been struck by thunder. ‘Albert is the father and that is final.’ She looked at Dimo with spite.

Dimo looked confused. ‘But Sister Samba has already revealed everything.’

‘Sister Samba is not me. I gave birth to the child and I alone know who the father is.’ There was defeat in the voice though all could see Bridget was wishing the situation could be reversed.

Dimo seemed prepared for war. ‘But this man is barren.’

Mr Njotu leapt off his chair and marched towards Dimo. ‘Who are you referring to as this man? Watch your mouth or else I will seal it for you.’ Albert’s finger was almost touching Dimo’s nose. The vehemence in his passionate voice was a sharp contrast to his physical fragility. ‘Bridget, do you know this man?’

Tetang jumped in between both men. ‘Please sit down both of you.’

It took some seconds before the belligerents took their seat. Tetang was still on his feet. ‘I agree entirely with Bridget. She determines who the father is. Besides we don’t want to give a child to an unmarried man.’

Sister Samba wanted to speak but kept quiet, conceding to the pragmatism of Tetang’s statement even though she knew on which side the incontestable truth lay.

‘No I don’t agree,’ fired Minna. ‘We all know the child is Dimo’s. He should be punished for having neglected him but the fact that the mother abandoned the child with us meant she had handed him to his father. We have the child. That makes him ours.’

‘I am sorry I brought the child to you the way I did,’ entered Bridget with a quavering voice. ‘It was a very stupid thing I did. I want my child back and you can’t stop me from taking him.’

‘Yes we can,’ said Minna with passion. ‘You abandoned him to his father’s family and when the court hears that, you will not see the child forever.’

Bridget laughed. ‘You want to intimidate me with the threat of court action? Try it and you’ll never have a peaceful night.’

‘Is that a threat?’ breathed Minna.

‘Pliz, everybody.’ Mrs Abbe stood up and clapped her hands. ‘Let us sit down and speak wiz calm.’ She waited as Minna and Bridget took their seats. ‘There iz wrong on both sides. Mozza abandon *bébé* and if Dimo is *fazza*, *fazza* also abandoned *bébé*. But *mozza* iz ze one who we are sure has *bébé*. So I tsink it will be best if ze *bébé* is handed to ze *mozza*. None of ze men in question has paid bride price for Bridget or married her. So only Bridget has ze *bébé*.’

There was silence in the house as Mrs Abbe sat down. Sister Samba took the floor. ‘You have spoken well my sister. That was exactly my thought. Bridget will decide who gets the child. Be it Dimo or Albert, I am sure Bridget will give the child to the real father; maybe the one who will marry her.’

‘I am marrying Albert,’ said Bridget from her seat.

‘Not this Albert. I am not going to marry a woman who is a woman for everybody. A woman who cannot keep his man’s most intimate secret.’

That stunned Bridget and she could not find her voice for close to a minute. ‘And I am

not going to marry a man who is barren,' said she looking frail and at the same time trying to sound defiant.

Albert carried his head in his hands, then stood up and walked out of the house. Mrs Abbe also got up and followed her brother. She however stopped at the door and turned around. 'Bye everybody but zis is not ze end,' she said mildly then her face took a savage turn. 'Bridget, I will teach you lesson you will never forget.' Mrs Abbe finally walked out.

There was silence which lasted for quite a while. Everybody sat still unsure of what to do next. Not even sister Samba who had the knack to break every deadlock.

'I want my child back,' said Bridget with firmness, breaking the silence.

'Come tomorrow to my brother's place and take him,' said Dimo without emotions.

Without warning, Bridget ran and fell down on her knees before Minna. 'I am very sorry for all I did.' She began to sob.

Minna did not know how to react. She raised her hands and dropped them back. She swept a hand over her hair and took a deep breath. She was taken completely aback by Bridget's move. She least expected it. She knew Bridget to be arrogant and pompous. This one that Bridget was going Christian on her was unbelievable. But this was the very Bridget not only procrastinating herself in front of her but also holding her feet and begging for forgiveness.

There was a long interval of silence as everyone sought to make sense of what was going on in the privacy of their hearts. Minna finally held Bridget by the hand and raised her from the floor. 'Come and take your child tomorrow,' said Minna solemnly. She hated herself for doing what she had just done. Bridget did not deserve the child. The excuses Bridget had made were not enough to think of abandoning her own child. A child she had carried for nine months?

Minna needed some kind of compensation for all the cost and trauma she and her family had gone through all caused by Bridget's frivolity. Not something material but at least some action that would make Minna believe that all the suffering she had endured had been recognised. And that compensation had to be paid by Bridget. But here was Bridget, getting the best of the laughs. Minna bit her lips and turned her face away in order not to see what she felt was a look of triumph on the idiot's podgy face. Not even the fact that she had lost Albert for good seemed to have affected her.

Minna was suddenly struck by a recent memory. 'Are you the Dara who wrote that letter to my husband?'

Bridget immediately turned around, her face creased over in fear and remorse. That was all the answer Minna needed.

'Cheap bitch,' Minna swore, fisting her hands.

'I think we should go now,' said Tetang rising with some vigour and seizing Minna by the hand. He was not going to tolerate any clash between his wife and Bridget. He had had enough excitement to last him a lifetime.

Minna rose and resisted Tetang's pull to cast piercing eyes at a woman whom she could have eaten raw and whole. She wanted to say something that could provoke Bridget to want to hang herself but her tongue felt too heavy. Besides she could not find the appropriate words. She was still furious with herself for having let Bridget get away so easily.

With her eyes itching to spring out tears, Minna embraced her friend who had come closer then followed her husband. She had not got to the door when a strange couple entered. She turned around in surprise as sister Samba greeted the couple with some familiarity. 'This is Inspector of Police Tata and the Mrs Juliet Fomba from social welfare,' Sister Samba made the introductions with a heavy voice. 'I wonder why they are here at this time.'

The guests shook hands with everyone and stopped in front of Bridget.

'Are you Bridget?' the thin but tall social worker asked.

Bridget nodded, looking confused.

The woman handed over to the much shorter police officer. 'We have just had

information that sometime last year you abandoned a child on the veranda of Mr Fru Tetang's residence. Is that correct?'

Bridget's body began to shake. Her voice did not come out but she nodded in the affirmative.

'And we hear you want to take the child back?' fired Mrs Fomba with a frown.

'He is my child,' said Bridget with sudden fervour. 'Who told you all this?'

'That does not matter,' entered the officer. 'But since you have confirmed the illegal act you committed, I am going to take you in for questioning and the child would be kept by the social welfare department until they can determined where best the child would go.'

Bridget erupted with anger, 'But he is my child. My flesh and blood. You have no right to take him away from me. And you have no right to arrest me.' She struggled as the officer clicked handcuffs around her wrists.

The officer dragged the struggling Bridget out and everyone looked on with varying degrees of awe.

'You did this,' Minna heard Bridget scream and she rushed to see Mrs Abbe leaning on the wall with a smile and rubbing a cell phone in her hand as Bridget rained one curse after the other on her. 'You will get me you barren bitch.' That was the last curse the officer allowed Bridget to utter as he hauled her away to a police car on the road. People came out of the bar to watch the noisy Bridget being led away in handcuffs.

'I'll follow you and get the child,' the social worker said to Minna after voicing a word of thanks to Mrs Abbe.

Minna wiped a hand over her face. 'Tell me madam. What is going to happen to the child?'

'My department and the court shall decide after studying the situation.' The woman sounded very officious. 'Would you like to keep the child for the time while the case is under scrutiny? Having kept him this long, we don't fear leaving him with you.'

Minna shook her head with resolve. 'I think I have done enough for him. You may come for him now.'

Tetang stood a distance from the house and watched impassively as Bridget was carted away. Though the afternoon was ebbing away, the heat outside was still more than mild. Tetang however was overcome by a sudden cold. He clasped his hands across his shoulders like a child wanting to be cuddled. He looked at his wife and shook his head. She definitely deserved better than all this.

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Akwen unexpectedly appeared to announce to her mother that Auntie Aggie had just left for Wum with Ngam. Nobody understood the implication immediately except Minna.

'When and how?' Minna was trembling.

'Some thirty minutes ago. She said she met a relative of her late husband who was on his way to Wum. Apparently he proposed to take her to Wum for free.'

'But how is she going to cope? I didn't give her any money.' Minna's eyes were on Tetang, hoping he could help quell the tension that was still growing in her.

'Gave her some yesterday.'

'Oh Teel! She almost divulged why she was worried. It would have complicated things further. 'Dimo, we have to drive as fast as we can now to Wum.'

Dimo stood passively by the door, not looking like one who was prepared to move. He had left the child who was now sleeping on his chair. Minna ignored him and ran to the road leaving the social worker bewildered. Minna began stopping one taxi after the other but none of them seemed to like her destination today. She began cursing herself and her aunt every time a taxi flashed passed her. Why did her aunt have to leave abruptly?

Just when it seemed one taxi was about to stop to pick her up, Dimo's car appeared with Tetang at the wheel and Akwen sitting behind. Minna took the other front seat without asking any question.

'But she was supposed to leave but tomorrow,' said Tetang, swinging the car down the main road.

Minna did not reply but kept murmuring faster and faster to herself. Tetang understood as he pushed harder on the throttle like a man on a death wish. Lucky for him traffic today was not that dense.

In less than five minutes, they were at the motor park where vehicles for Wum often stopped. Minna and Tetang jumped out and ran to the booking office. They were relieved to be told that Auntie Aggie and the in-law had stopped at the park and had left for Wum just five minutes before in a pick-up truck. They had a lead to pursue Auntie Aggie. The attendant in the office gave them a good description of the vehicle.

They ran back to their car. Down the road, they could not see any vehicle that fitted the description of the pick-up. Tetang rallied every nerve in his body and wheeled his brother's car with illegal speed. He noticed a gendarme officer blowing a whistle and waving a large hand in the air. Too late. The officer had to jump to one side as Tetang whizzed passed.

They were some three kilometres out of Bamenda when they saw the truck ahead. Tetang pressed the pedal until it touched the floor. In a couple of minutes, he was overtaking the truck, flashing all the lamps and hooting the horn. Minna who had wound down the glass on her own door whipped a hand in the air to help warn the driver to stop.

The driver respectfully did though coming out immediately to shout out insults. Tetang stopped a short distance ahead and together with Minna, was out in an instant. They sprang towards the man, undaunted by his hysterical curses.

Neither Minna nor Tetang knew the man. The man also did not show any sign of recognising anyone of them as he kept blasting them in foul terms. The man did not even respond to their apologies and was only interested in making them know they were traffic hooligans.

Tetang almost declared they had made an error when he got the scream from his wife. Minna had recognised the woman who was coming out from the passenger side of the single-cabin truck.

Auntie Aggie almost lost her heart when she recognised her niece and the husband. She was wracked by fear and guilt. 'I am sorry I left like that,' she cried, rushing to meet Minna. 'I told Akwen to tell you.'

Minna nodded, holding her chest and falling on her aunt. The man quieten down when he saw the two women in an embrace. 'She is the niece I told you about,' Auntie Aggie said to the man.

'Give me the baby,' Minna did not have the time to give further fine points.

'But why?' Auntie Aggie asked.

'Just bring him. I'll explain later.'

'But I am on my way to Wum.'

'You can go but not the child. Where is he?'

Minna followed her aunt to the car. The child had been laid in a carton that was on a tiny seat at the back. Auntie Aggie brought him out and placed him in Minna's hands. 'Safe journey Auntie if you are not coming back with me.' Minna turned immediately and raced towards their own car.

'But I don't understand,' said Auntie Aggie confused.

'You will know later,' Minna shouted and entered the car. She handed the child to Akwen as her husband slipped in behind the wheel. Tetang set the car down the road immediately Minna gave the signal. He had thought Auntie Aggie was going to accompany them.

Tetang had to take another route to avoid the gendarme officer who had certainly taken note of his car. This route was very bad but it still led him to Sister Samba's place even if they took a longer time.

Minna was breathing in panic as she raced out of the car with the child. 'Where is she?' she fired at Dimo who was now sitting on the step that led into Sister Samba's parlour,



rubbing his slightly bearded chin with a hand. Dimo did not understand. He stood up as Minna approached him with a child in her hand. He wanted to send forward his hand to take the child. But the hostile look on Minna's face dissuaded him.

'Where's the social worker,' said Minna with desperation. She just wanted this child out of her life once and for all. She had to cut away from him both physically and emotionally. The longer he was close to her, the more difficult it would be cutting the emotional link.

Dimo pointed behind her. Minna turned and saw the social worker coming with Tetang and a frightened Akwen. Sister Samba emerged from the house with a beer opener in her hand. Everyone watched in silence as Minna lowered the child into Mrs Fomba's unsuspecting hands. The woman wanted to protest but realised that Minna was not prepared for any compromise.

'Where's Ngam,' Minna asked her friend.

'Sleeping. I'll go and get him.' Sister Samba ran into the room and was back in a couple of seconds with the child. Minna gathered the sleeping child over her shoulders. Tears ran down her face. Was her husband going to tolerate this child? The real Ngam? She left the rest and headed alone in the direction of the main road. Tetang was soon behind her. He clutched her around the waist.

'I'll gladly adopt this one,' he said, digging his nose into her hair.

Minna stopped and hooked him with her free hand. 'Thanks,' she said with a smile. 'That means a lot to me. But there is still one thing I need you to do for me. Talk to Dimo with understanding. Forgive him and help him to get out of this mess. He looks like a man who is about to commit suicide.'

Tetang nodded. 'I'll help him. After all, he is the only brother I have. I am not prepared to lose him and all that money he makes.'

Minna called Akwen and handed the real Ngam to her. This time around, Minna was no longer scared.

'What about Dorothy?'

Minna bowed her head and walked ahead of her husband. Then she stopped and turned back towards him. 'I am thinking of what to write as her epitaph.'

Tetang was shocked and wanted to rebuke her but a cry from the real Ngam shut him up. He walked ahead and took the child from Akwen. He placed the child over his shoulders and rocked him. The crying ceased. 'Magic eh,' he turned to Minna, smiling. Minna smiled back and suddenly felt light. She wished the moment could last for the rest of her life.

If Minna has a successful career, a loving husband, wonderful children - all well-deserved - is it compulsory that she must also toil for a reckless sister who has diametrically opposed priorities? Her biased mother thinks so. What if the sister dumps her child on Minna's veranda and vamooses and in trying to find the sister to give back her child, there appear some strange persons and a cult intended on grabbing the child? A decision has to be made and made fast. How could Minna ever envisage that in trying to help her careless sister and baby while taking care of her own family she would end up antagonising everyone in spite of her desperate battle to spread love to all? Just where are her priorities? How prepared is she for the unexpected conclusion to her simmering travails? Hell definitely breaks loose in this emotionally charged family saga in which Emmanuel Achu carves a world where such opposites as love and hate, sympathy and apathy, despair and hope, fear and courage, friendship and enmity reside as bedfellows.

*Disturbing the Peace* is definitely a lyrical treat where you would be shocked to discover that being responsible can equate to being cursed.

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Born in December 1965, Emmanuel Achu studied at Presbyterian Secondary School Mankon, CCAST Bambili, ENSET Douala, and University of Leeds, UK. He is a Pedagogic Inspector and Civil Engineer. From 2004 to 2006, he undertook mentoring programme on Writing organised jointly by the British Council and the University of Lancaster. *Disturbing The Peace* is his second novel. The first was *Wrong Target* published in 2003.



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